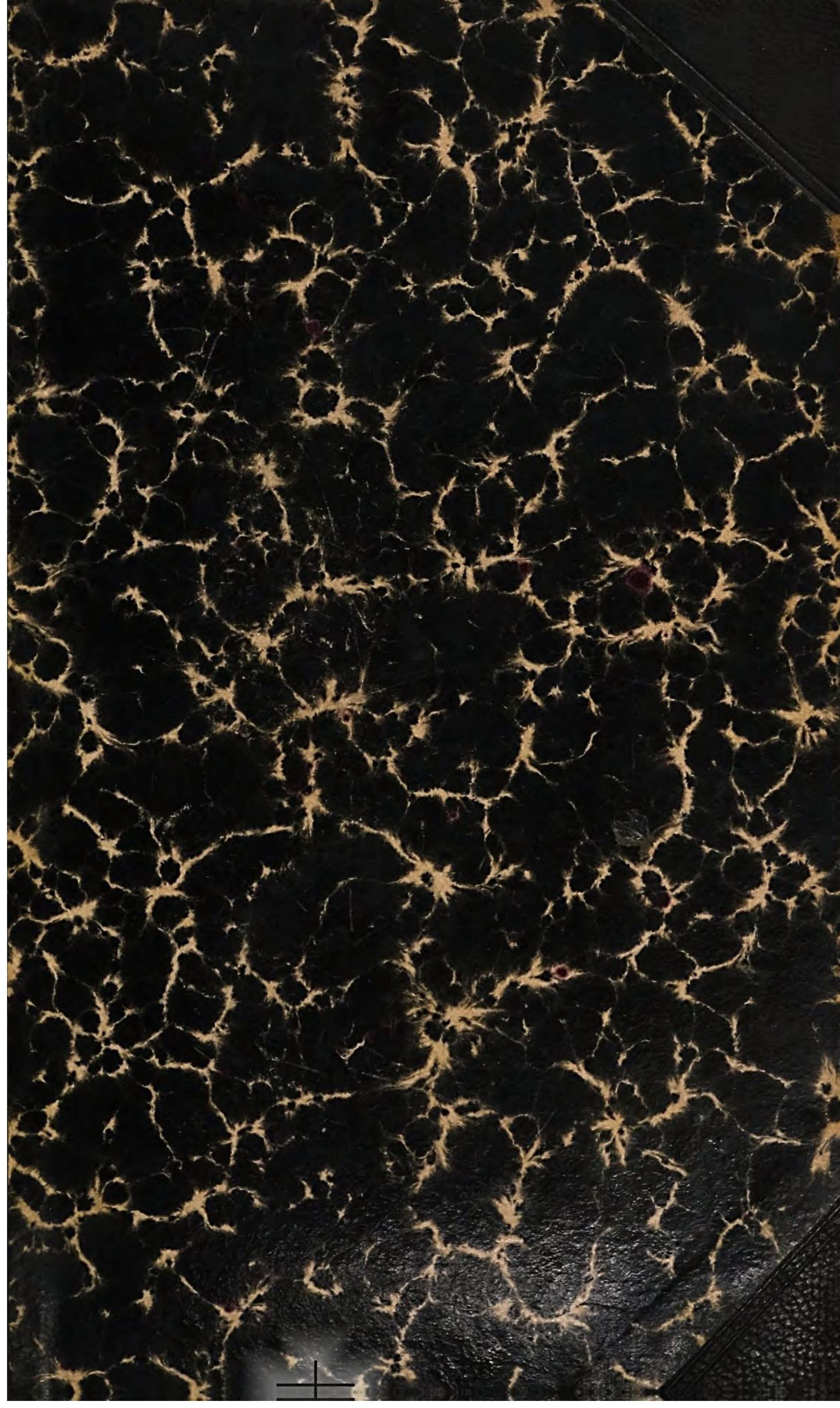
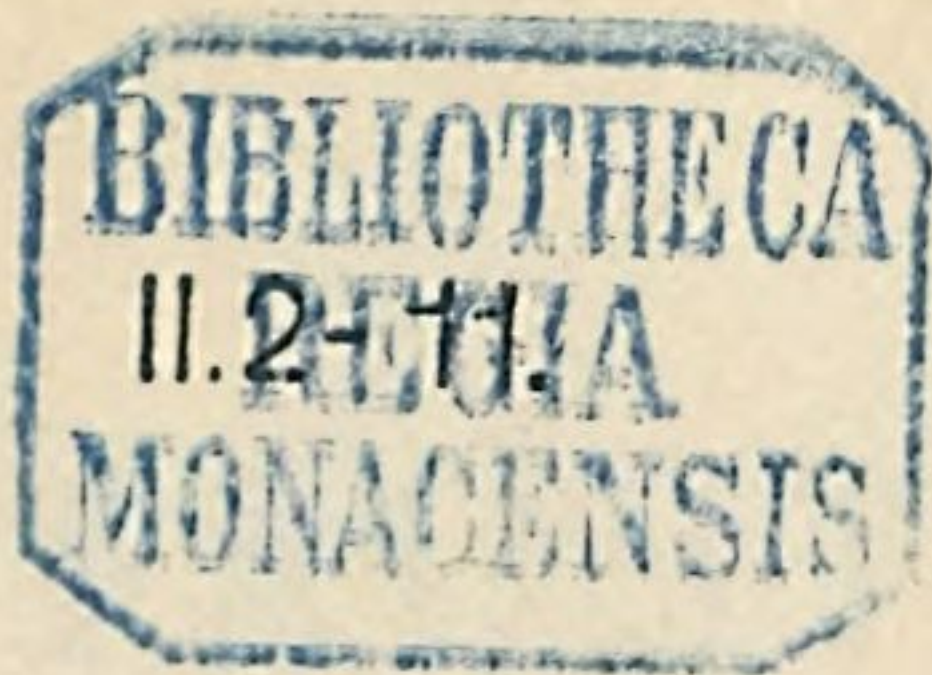




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DEAR FAUSTINA. BY RHODA BROUGHTON.

IN ONE VOLUME.

TAUCHNITZ EDITION.

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DEAR FAUSTINA

BY

RHODA BROUGHTON,

AUTHOR OF "COMETH UP AS A FLOWER," ETC.

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DEAR FAUSTINA



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DEAR FAUSTINA.

CHAPTER I.

“*TEARS!*”

The accent with which this monosyllable is uttered, though tempered with leniency, is undoubtedly one of reproach. The person to whom it is addressed recognises it as such, and, though it has not at once a quite drying effect upon her, yet it is in a voice of indistinct apology that she proffers her excuse.

“I do not think I am much of a cryer; you have never seen me cry before.”

“Why do I see you cry now?”

The reproacher and reproached are both feminine, the superiority in years lying with the former, in comeliness with the latter.

“Is not it allowable, or at least excusable, at such a crisis in my life?”

But her tone is deferential, and her moist square of cambric—she has very nice pocket-handkerchiefs—slides back into her pocket.

“I could not bear you to spoil your eyes by crying, even if there were cause; and there is none.”

The elder girl has sat down by her young friend, and is speaking in that tone of passionate caressingness which used to belong to Love, but which female friendship has lately stolen from his quiver.

“It is very dear of you to mind about my eyes”—gratefully.

“As Mme. de Sévigné said to Mme. de Grignan ‘J’ai mal à votre poitrine,’ so I can say, ‘J’ai mal à vos yeux.’”

“Thank you very much.”

“And you are dimming and reddening them”—with a fond inspection—“for absolutely no reason.”

“Ah, there we must differ.”

“In my opinion, so far from having cause for tears, you have every reason for doing the other thing.”

“For laughing?”

“Yes.”

“For laughing because my dear, kind old father is dead?”

“The edge of that loss is blunted by six months. You are not crying for him.”

“Because my home is broken up, then? Because

I see my sister drifting away from me? Because my future is chaotic? No, dear Faustina"—wiping furtively away one more water-drop—"it is only your loving wish to comfort me that could make you support such a paradox."

"I would perjure myself pretty freely with that object, I own; but in this case there is no need—the break-up of your home is indispensable to your mental development. As long as your father's *régime* lasted you were like an oak in a flower-pot; sooner or later the pot must have cracked."

Althea—for that is her name—shakes her head.

"He had the limitations, and perhaps a few of the prejudices, of his date; but"—her voice slightly quivering—"I was very, very happy with him."

At the small break in her speech, indicating the depth and sincerity of her regret for the departed Philistine, Faustina feelingly presses her hand, and deems it judicious to pass on to a branch of the subject on which she may feel herself on firmer ground.

"As to your sister drifting away from you, it was in the nature of things that she should. 'Can two walk together, except they be agreed?' as your fine old Book says."

It is needless to state that Miss Faustina is an Agnostic, but, considerable as are the strides made under her auspices by her pupil in the new path, she

can never hear without a wince her Mentor's condescending patronage, "as an interesting collection of archaic literary documents," of the Holy Scriptures.

"We used to agree as well as most sisters in the old days," she rejoins regretfully. "Since my father's death—since Clare's engagement—subjects of difference seem to have sprung up between us. There are some topics on which there is no use pretending that we think alike."

"Your humble servant, for instance?"—with a smile.

Althea's silence may perhaps be taken for an assent to this query, or perhaps may be due merely to the preoccupation with which her own memory is pursuing the history of the family dissensions.

"Though we were not alike in our natures, we were very much at one in many of our opinions, in our complete want of sympathy with all my mother's methods, in our indignation at the way in which she tried to ride roughshod over my father's wishes."

"She did not succeed"—rather dryly.

"No, because his nature was too strong a one; but now that the check of his firm hand is removed, I dread to think what eccentricities she may run into!"

She breaks off as if the subject were too painful a one to bear further pursuing.

There is a silence.

"We agreed so perfectly in our dislike of the type of mother's friends—I mean Clare and I did. It seems incredible now, but how I dreaded *your* coming!"

Faustina smiles.

"It did not require a conjurer to discover that. No, darling, do not look pained; I intended no reproach; and we have changed all that"—with a hand-pressure.

"It seems so ungrateful, looking back, to think how I disliked you all through that first visit; how I misjudged your views, and disbelieved in your aspirations, and hated your short hair parted on one side. Even now"—hesitatingly—"I rather regret that your example induced mother to adopt the same style of hair-dressing."

"It may have been my example; it certainly was not my precept."

"If it had not been for my father's death, and your extraordinary and most unexpected sympathy and kindness to me at the time and afterwards, I dare say we might never have been drawn together. Oh, but you *were* kind!"—her eyes filling.

"There is no question of kindness where one loves."

A short pause.

"If there were anything settled as to my future," resumes the younger girl presently, "*whatever* it might

be, I hope I should be able to make up my mind to it; but though it is six months since dear father's death, mother has as yet given no indication of what plans she has formed for us."

"No indication?"—lifting her eyebrows.

"Well, no doubt that is the wrong word to use; of course, one can see in what direction her bent lies. But I do not quite understand how that is to be combined with forming a home for her children."

"Perhaps that does not enter into her scheme."

"Do you mean"—her eyes opening wide, as if this idea, presented for the first time, had something scaring in it—"that she means to turn us adrift?"

"You are all pretty well full-fledged; I see no great kindness in keeping well-grown young birds in a nest too small for them."

Then, as the novelty of the idea, too new as yet to take any of the pleasant colouring conveyed by her friend's tone, keeps Althea silent, she goes on:

"Clara has turned, or is turning, herself out. Your brothers, with their embryo professions, are hovering on the very edge. Fanny, though her wing-feathers may not be quite grown, will very soon be fit to fly."

"Fanny is only seventeen."

"Oh, there is no cause of fear for Fanny," with vague indifference.

"And I—I am certainly quite full-fledged, but I

should be glad to have some idea"—with a slight return of unsteadiness in the voice—"in what direction my first flight is to be made."

"Can you have any doubt upon that head?"

That some affectionate reproach is meant to be conveyed by the question is plain from the speaker's manner, but Althea is too preoccupied to observe it.

"I think that mother must have made up her mind—must have some proposal to make to us, or some ultimatum to convey—by the gravity with which she asked us all to meet her in the library at four o'clock."

"It is nearly that now, isn't it?"

"I can't tell you with what vague and yet strong dread I look forward to her announcement. I have tried to face every possible contingency, and yet——" She breaks off.

"Tell me"—with lenient indulgence, as to a sick child—"a few of the bugbears you have conjured up. I am not at all afraid of not being able to lay them."

"There is not time," with a feverish glance clockwards; "and it would not be worth while, as we shall so soon know the worst."

"Still, it might ease your heart a little."

"Though you say that I have outgrown her—and perhaps in some ways I have, thanks to you"—gratefully—"yet I shall miss Clare dreadfully when we are virtually *tête-à-tête*—mother and I; for the boys will be,

of course, away, and Fanny is too young and unformed to count much. I fear that the radical discrepancies between all our tastes and feelings will come out terribly strong. I do not think it can be quite our fault, but we have none of us ever been able to get near mother."

"She ought never to have married," replies Faustina gravely; "that was the root-mistake of her life, as it has been of so many millions of other women. Now that she has regained the use of her wings—my dear, do not look hurt; I am only putting the state of the case before you from *her* point of view—it remains to be seen to what point of the compass she will fly."

"And shall I have to fly with her?" rejoins Althea, with a disconsolate intonation. "Ah, there is the clock striking! Do not let us be a minute late!"—seizing the hand of her friend and pulling her towards the door.

As they hurry down the stairs, Faustina Bateson and Miss Althea Vane meet the other members of the latter's family, all with equal haste converging to the rendezvous. Apparently all are as anxious as herself to learn their destiny. Of the two boys who, with the superior speed of longer legs, pass them on an upper landing, one goes by them without notice. The other, and younger, essays a trifling schoolboy pinch on his sister. Of the two girls, who also emerge from upper chambers, the taller and maturer half holds out her

hand, as if encouragingly, to Althea, but, seeing her fingers already possessed by Faustina, drops it quickly.

As they reach the door of the library Faustina pauses.

"Had not I better leave you here, darling? This is a purely family matter"—offering to loosen her clasp.

"No, oh no; come with me! I shall want you to give me courage."

They follow the others, already seating themselves on chairs set in a row as if for family prayers, though Mrs. Vane would have scorned the simile. The library is a good-sized room—for London a large one—dark with the books that climb the walls to the ceiling, with the dusk of the eighteenth century wainscot and doors, and with the habitual sombreness of a back look-out. The books are for the most part old—obviously the accumulations of respectable generations—but the litter that covers the large writing-table is as obviously new: reports, schedules, books of reference, type-written letters, Socialist journals. At this table is seated a lady, who, as soon as her ear tells her by the cessation of any rustling or footsteps that her audience are arrived, and awaiting her, rises, and, turning slowly round, faces them. Were it not for a slight condescension in the matter of petticoats, it would not be obvious to a stranger that it is not a slender man who is preparing

to address the little group, so austere masculine is the just-gray-touched thick short hair parted on one side, the coat, the tie, the waistcoat. This widow might at a pinch, and behind a table which would conceal the degradation of the female skirt, well pass for a little widower. She stands for a second silent, not collecting herself, or seeking womanly words or modes of expression, since, when it does come, her speech flows with perfect round fluency, but calmly eyeing the row of young people before her. Her hands are lightly clasped in front of her; nor does she need to eke out her easy oratory by any of the awkward and anguished gestures with which the ordinary Anglo-Saxon, when forced on to his unwilling legs, tries to ease the birth-pangs of his still-born fancy. Still quietly meeting her hearers' anxious eyes with her own cool, steely-gray ones, she begins:

"I have asked you to meet me here to-day because I thought it simpler to tell you all collectively what otherwise I should have to communicate to each separately. This day is a day of crisis in all our lives." She pauses a moment; evidently from no difficulty in proceeding, but with a calculated intention of letting these few preparatory words have time to sink into the soil of her hearers' minds. "You have known—dimly, perhaps, and vaguely, for I have never explained them categorically to you, knowing with what

an absolute want of sympathy they would have been met—the aims and aspirations of my life, and how entirely they have hitherto been frustrated by”—a slight and telling hiatus—“circumstances.” Althea has put up her handkerchief to her mouth. A sob is rising in her throat at this, to all her children, very apparent allusion to their father. “The time is now come when I am at liberty to obey the call which has for many years been ringing in my ears!” Another effective pause. “To some of you, perhaps”—her eye rests for an instant doubtfully on Althea—“may have come a glimmer of comprehension of what my enforced disregarding of that call has cost me, but on this branch of the subject it is needless to dwell. I have only briefly to indicate to you my scheme for the future.” A tiny rustle of expectation, a caught-in breath, tell with what eager attention the little audience is listening. “It is probably unknown to you all”—an irrepressible, though very slight and governed, intonation, as of contempt—“that within the last few months a band of women thinkers and workers has collected together, and formed itself into a society, whose object and aim is ‘the redressing of the balance,’ the balance as between man and woman, as between rich and poor, as between the treader-down and the trodden.” She is not looking at her children now, but out into the unseen future of battle with a lightening eye. “You may object”—with

a calling back of her attention to the row of forgotten faces before her—"that in such a society there is nothing novel; that a hundred such have, within the last few years of awakening out of sleep, sprung into being; and I am quite willing to grant it. That which differentiates this society from all others is, firstly, that it applies itself, not to any one branch of the subject, but to the whole colossal body of it, to the redressing of the balance as between every wronger and every wronged, in each stratum of society, in each nationality, and in every quarter of the globe; and, secondly—which is perhaps a necessary corollary—that it demands, and will take nothing less, the whole being, the entire life, with no reservations—the soul, body, heart, and energies of each of its members. I—and it is with a deep sense of pride, and a trembling consciousness of the responsibility attached to so great an office, that I make the statement—have been offered the presidency of this society."

She stops, not because her theme or her breath is exhausted, but as if to give time and opportunity for any challenge of, or objection to, her purpose that may be offered. None such comes. It is received in total silence—without even the faint expectant rustle that had accompanied her opening sentences. She proceeds:

"It must be apparent to the meanest capacity"—

each of the speaker's five sons and daughters has the impression that the superlative adjective is applied with a special sense of its fitness to him or her self—"that the carrying out of such a scheme as I have sketched is incompatible with the cares and duties of family life. For those cares, those duties, I have never been endowed with any special aptitudes. Yet to those cares, those duties, has been already sacrificed what must prove far more than half of an existence, destined, as I think—though here you will probably, nay, certainly, not be in accord with me—to higher and broader uses."

Once again her lifted eye lightens, and for a second a well-checked yet visible emotion hinders her clear and ready utterance.

"During the past years many women might have ordered dinners and arranged social engagements better than I; few—comparatively few—women have, as I believe, ever been so penetrated with the pity of humanity!"

Her voice sinks a little, weighed down by no counterfeit feeling, but in the next sentence rises again alertly, as if borne upwards on glad wings.

"The course of time, the chain of circumstances, have enabled me at length to throw the reins on the neck of that pity! No trammelling lesser duty any longer hinders me; and since, as I have pointed out to

you, the major part of my life has been, in respect to what is its main import, already wasted, you will readily comprehend that I have no time to lose. I am resolved"—clasping her hands tightly together—"to set sail at once upon that noble voyage which, but for the clogging, petty impediments of domestic life, I should have embarked upon twenty-five years ago."

Her lips close, and her eyes meet in calm and determined challenge those of her hearers. To that challenge not one of those hearers rises, though it is plain that each of them accepts it in a different way. The elder son throughout the interview has kept his eyes resolutely fixed on the carpet, as if by no other method could he enough convey his utter disapproval of, and protest against, the whole proceeding. The younger is looking at his mother with a puzzled, school-boy stare; Clare is turning her engagement-ring round upon her finger, as if only by holding on tight to the happy fact that it symbolises can she endure the painfulness of the present ordeal. Althea has snatched her hand from Faustina's strenuous clasp to hide the cruel quiver that is convulsing all her lower face, and Fanny is undisguisedly whimpering. Seeing that the pause which she has made in order to give her audience an opportunity for question or objection is not likely to be used for that purpose, Mrs. Vane presently resumes:

"During the years of our reciprocal relations I have

done my duty by you according to my lights. If I have lavished fewer caresses upon you than other mothers, I have laboured harder than most to impart to you that habit of mind, that mode of regarding life, which are more valuable than any endearments. That I have failed to inoculate you with my ideas is due partly to a fundamental difference in nature between us, but chiefly to the existence of a strongly antagonistic influence entirely outweighing and rendering nugatory mine. That influence no longer exists"—a slight, decorous lowering of her voice notifies, if any such notification were needed, that the allusion is once again to her late husband—"but its effect remains. I would fain have led all or any of you in the path I purpose to tread—the only path that seems to me to be really worth treading—but since this was not to be, our ways must part. The life which I have bound myself to lead is one that will not admit of a settled home. It will entail much moving from place to place, much public speaking"—a slight writhe on the part of the down-faced elder son—"an entire freedom from the ties of family life. Those ties I have, as I believe, now a full right to resign. Three of you, Edward, Clare, and Althea, are of age, and therefore legally competent to the conduct of your own affairs. Fanny and Thomas are still minors, and, since your father died intestate, you are aware that their guardianship devolved on me. That

guardianship I have determined to resign to their eldest brother. He, with the professional aid of Mr. Wills, will be able to arrange their future in a manner much more consonant to the collective wishes of their family than I could do. I have only to add that I hope we shall part with reciprocal goodwill"—there is, or Althea fancies it, a very faint human quiver in the metallic voice at the utterance of the wish—"as those who respect each other's aims, even while unable to share them. I earnestly hope that you will all prosper in your several roads. Clare has chosen the beaten track, the well-worn track of man's hewers of wood and drawers of water. Althea has not yet made that election. Perhaps she never will"—with a slender tinge of hope in the intonation. "If she does not, if the progress of time, and the development of mind and heart that it brings, lead her to feel the pity of humanity more strongly within her than the desire for selfish, individual happiness, I need not say with what welcome we shall receive her into our ranks. I need not detain you any longer."

She bows her head slightly, and turns again to her loaded writing-table as they file out.

CHAPTER II.

THE young people troop up to the drawing-room silently together. Faustina enters it with them, perhaps concluding legitimately that Althea's invitation to support her in the crucial interview extends to the discussion that is to follow it; perhaps guided by a curiosity stronger than her manners. It looks at first as if that curiosity were likely to pass unsatisfied, since for some moments none of the repudiated family seem capable of expressing, or, at all events, inclined to express, their opinions upon the just past interview.

It is the youngest who at last breaks the spell. Thomas, the Etonian, speaks: "So she has chucked us all!"

The elder son has been leaning his elbow on the mantel-piece, with his back to his kindred.

"Our mother has, at all events, the merit of dotting her *i*'s and crossing her *t*'s."

As he speaks he wheels round, and discovers the fact, before unsuspected by him, of the presence of Miss Bateson. The displeased surprise which that dis-

covery engenders in his already gloomy young eye must be patent enough to its object.

But she finds it convenient not to see it, and sits tight until a stronger, yet gentler, lever dislodges her.

"If," says Clare, speaking for the first time, "we have to discuss mother's actions, and I do not see how it is to be avoided, I think it ought to be quite among ourselves."

The voice is very gentle, but there can be no mistake as to the intended application of the words; and a slight colour comes into Faustina's handsome olive cheek.

"The house is to be cleared of strangers," she says, rising and moving to the door, with a half-laugh; "I am sorry that I am thought to come under that head."

A deeper stain than that which had only just tinged her friend's face dyes Althea's.

"You might have let her stay; she is quite like one of us."

Clare does not retort, but emphatic disclaimers come from the masculine members of the family—"Speak for yourself!" and "I cannot say that I regard her in that light."

As for Fanny, her mood is still watery, and, like Clymene, the tenderest-spirited of Keats' Titans, she "sobs among her tangled hair."

"I was afraid that there was some unpleasant sur-

prise in store for us; but I did not expect quite such a clean sweep," says Clare, moved, but not disordered like her junior. "Fanny dear, do stop crying! We must make the best of it."

"It is all very well for you to talk," replies Fanny, attempting no compliance with her sister's request, "who have nothing to make the best of!—good husband, nice house, waiting for you. But what *is* to become of Althea and me?"

"As to Althea, that is her own affair," says the elder brother, with a noticeable dryness in his tone. "But as far as you are concerned, Fanny, you need not be afraid but that *you* will be looked after."

The latter clause is very kindly spoken, albeit a dash of new young authority tinges the vexation of his voice. Nearly all men feel kindly towards Fanny, who is a very pleasant little object to the eye, and who possesses the gift—more valuable to a woman than any wisdom of her own—of making every man she speaks to feel wise. She now puts out her hand confidently to Edward, and says:

"But I cannot go and live with you at Christ Church!"

The schoolboy gives a chuckle, presumably at the idea of his sister in cap and gown; but the feeling of the little assembly is so distinctly anti-mirthful that he gets red and strangles it.

In all their minds, with the exception, perhaps, of the boy, is oppressively present the memory of that day, six months ago, when Edward had been wired for from Oxford, and Thomas from Eton, and they had all—coming straight from their father's death-bed—assembled in this very room. The only difference seems to be that then the blinds had been drawn down, and that now they are drawn up; but so dark is the London day that the change in this respect is not very perceptible. The likeness forces a few low, moved words from Clare:

“Oh, *how* he would have hated it!”

For the last hour Althea had at intervals been struggling with almost uncheckable sobs; but the sight of Fanny's facile tears seems to have dried her deeper-fountained ones, and she gives in answer only a little melancholy nod of assent.

“If she would but have waited a little—waited till these two young ones were grown up,” says Edward, turning round again to resume his former position facing the fire, with his elbow on the mantel-piece, as if not wishing his family to suspect how much Clare's putting into words his own regrets has upset him.

“She would have lost six years,” says Althea, speaking for the first time. “We must try to look at things from her point of view; as she said, she has no time to lose.”

"It depends upon what one's definition of lost time is," rejoins he coldly. "Yours and mine would probably differ."

His tone—for they had once been allies—stings her into another painful flush.

"As you know, I have never had any sympathy with mother's views. Until to-day——"

But he interrupts her impatiently, as if advocacy, however slight, of their parent's extravagances is more than, in the present state of his temper and feelings, he can bear.

"It is not of much use discussing her views or our opinions of them, which are sure to be pretty well at variance."

"Whatever happens, do not let us squabble among ourselves!" cries Clare, laying one hand on Althea's shoulder, and holding out the other pacifyingly in the direction—since he is too far off to be reached by touch—of Edward. "We may differ—I am afraid that there is no help for that—but there is no earthly reason why we should not all be friends."

"I am afraid that there is every reason," returns the young man, with stubborn bitterness. "Elements of dissension besides those with which Nature has endowed us have been imported into the family by one of us, but it is no use discussing that subject now; it would be mere waste of time. Such of us as agree had better

talk over our plans quietly together, when we have the opportunity."

"You shall have it now!" says Althea, growing scarlet, getting quickly up, and walking towards the door. "You again wish the house to be cleared of strangers"—quoting what had been her friend's parting words—"perhaps when I am gone you will think it sufficiently purged!"

Nor do all Clare's entreaties—Althea's ear tells her that no other voice joins in her petition—avail to detain her. But, though it is in the cause of friendship that she is a sufferer, she does not immediately seek the society of the bone of contention. It is in the retirement of her own third-story bedroom that her sister, coming, after the lapse of more than an hour, in search of her, finds her.

"Are you alone? May I come in?"

"Come in."

Clare enters, casting a quick look round the room as she does so.

Althea laughs, a little bitterly, recognising its apprehensive quality.

"You need not be afraid. My apartment is not polluted by the presence of poor Faustina!"

"*Poor* Faustina! That is the last epithet I should think of applying to her."

"Is it? Well, have you come to tell me how satis-

factorily you all arranged your future, after you had turned me out?"

"We did not turn you out; you turned yourself out."

"I think I had a tolerably distinct hint to stay away."

"Poor old Edward!" says Clare, with a compassionate inflection; "he is sore and hurt. You must make allowances for him."

"*Poor* Edward! I think the epithet quite as much misapplied to him as to Faustina."

"We will not apply it to either of them, then; we will abstain from epithets altogether; they are generally misfits."

"I know that I am very cross"—contritely, and with a breaking voice—"but it is hard to have every man's hand against me! I am not used to it."

"No one's hand is against you. To prove it, I have come to make you a proposal."

"From Edward?"

"No, from myself."

Clare has sat down on the end of her sister's bed, a smile of anticipated pleasure in the pleasure she is about to give lighting into beauty a face which in general does not rise above comeliness.

A slight answering glow of vague hope illumines Althea's prettier features.

"I have come to suggest that you should live with us—with me and William."

“*With you and William!* Why, he hates the sight of me!”

“He does nothing of the kind; he is far too good to hate anyone.”

“Well, I do not know what a good man does instead of hating, but whatever it is, William does that. He would never hear of your plan.”

“He *has* heard of it. He came in five minutes after you left us, and he—he is delighted at the idea!”—with a slightly faltering voice.

Althea’s face is an expressive one, and at this statement it assumes a look of such extreme incredulity that they both laugh a little.

“He would be away at the Stock Exchange most of the day,” pursues William’s betrothed, with an heroic assumption of thinking this a subject for congratulation; “and you and I have always pulled together perfectly until Faus—until just lately, and even now, since we know the few subjects on which we differ, we might easily agree to avoid them.”

“And Fanny?”

“Fanny thinks she would like to go to Paris for two years to Madame Sarrasin, to study at the Conservatoire, and Edward sees no objection.”

There is a pause. In the shifty firelight—hitherto the room’s only illumination—the expression of the younger sister’s face is but imperfectly to be deciphered,

and the elder one, impatient to read it, turns the button of the electric light. It is a very uncertain April countenance that the sudden shock of hard radiance reveals.

"I should be the fifth wheel of the coach," and, a minute later: "Double-actioned establishments scarcely ever answer." But there is a sound of semi-yielding in her voice.

"You—you had not made any other plan, I suppose?"

"How could I? The whole thing was sprung upon us as such a surprise."

"I thought—I imagined that you might have had some project proposed to you by—another person."

"By Faustina?"

"Yes."

Althea shakes her head.

"I have not seen her since she, like me"—with a slight return of bitterness—"was requested to efface herself."

Clare gives a sigh, which she tries to make not too patently one of satisfaction. If it contains any other ingredient, she endeavours with equal loyalty to suppress that.

"It is very good and unselfish, and like you, to propose what must be such a sacrifice to you," says Althea in an affectionate, moved voice. "Such a sacrifice as

the continual presence of any third person, were it an angel from heaven, must entail upon a newly-married couple who like each other!"

Perhaps this sentiment finds some echo in the bosom of the person addressed, for she rather kindly evades than absolutely contradicts it.

"I dare say you will not trouble us long. I dare say before a year is over you will be a newly-married couple, or, rather"—laughing—"half one, yourself."

"I shall never marry. You know that I have a horror of it."

"I know"—reddening with a nearer approach to real anger than her placid, smooth face often shows—"that of late you have chosen to say so, and I also know to what influence to attribute it; but when once you have got away from that influence——"

"I have no wish"—with a complexion quite as heightened as her sister's—"to get away from it, since it is far the noblest I have ever known."

"We must be talking at cross-purposes," says Clare, her tone changing from its unwonted ire to one of apprehensive distress. "A moment ago I thought that you had all but consented to come to us—to William and me!"

"How would that remove me from her influence? You will live in London, and Faustina's work must always keep her here."

"But you do not suppose"—she breaks off, and, after an ominous pause, goes on more deliberately: "You *must* see that I could not possibly ask William to admit into his house a person whom he dislikes and disapproves as much as he does Miss Bateson."

"And you *must* see"—with a crimson face, and in a key trembling between indignation and pain—"that you could not possibly ask *me* to live in a house which shuts its door upon my dearest and most valued friend."

"You might see her, of course, if you chose, at other places. I need not say that neither William nor I would put any hindrance in the way of your doing that, however much we might dislike it."

Althea shakes her head.

"The very fact of knowing that we differed upon so vital a subject——"

"*Vital?*"

"To *me*, vital—would be a perennial source of dissension between us. No, Clare"—with a sad, fixed dignity—"I fully recognise the generosity that dictated your offer, but it would not be for the happiness of either of us that I should accept it."

"You are given the choice between Faustina and me," says Clare, in a profoundly hurt voice, "and you choose Faustina."

The irrepressible, or, at all events, unrepressed, con-

tempt which mingles with the wounded feeling of her tone stings Althea into prompt rejoinder.

"Much as you dislike her, you would not have a very high opinion of me if I were willing to throw over one who has cut herself adrift from every natural tie in order to devote herself to what she thinks—to what everyone must think—the higher claims."

"That is her own version," replies Clare, in a tone whose unaffected disgust pierces through the habitual suave moderation of her voice. "Other people say that she left home because she was kicked out—that is, because she could not get on with any one member of her family."

"If one falls so low as to listen to what 'other people' say——" cries Althea, championship lifting her voice into a pitch several keys higher than its natural one.

What the other limb of her sentence would have been does not appear, since it is amputated by the opening of the door and the insertion of a dark head.

"My own darling, what has become of you? I have been searching for you everywhere! Have you, too, been turned out by——"

Her speech breaks off as short—on catching sight of Clare—as her "own darling's" had done, and they all for a moment or two look at each other with uncomfortable scarlet faces; that is to say, two of the faces are scarlet, the third keeps its cool sallow untinged.

Clare cuts the disagreeable knot by going, simply saying to Althea in a lowered voice, which implies that she would fain exclude Faustina from being co-hearer of her speech:

"If you alter your mind, as I think and hope you will, you have only to let us know."

The door closes.

"What are you to alter your mind about?" asks Faustina in a voice of tender curiosity; "or"—seeing that Althea hesitates—"is it something that you have been forbidden to tell me? If so, of course do not think of answering."

"It is no secret. I am sure Clare would not mind your hearing. She has been asking me to live with her and William."

"And you have accepted?"

"No; I have refused."

Miss Bateson gives a sigh of perhaps rather ostentatious relief. "How wise!"

"Was it wise?" asks the other, half sadly, the advantages of the proposed plan having begun to loom large upon her from the moment she had rejected it. "I should have had love and warmth and family life, which, after all, are three good things."

"Love and warmth in larger measure are waiting you elsewhere, if you will only take them; and as to

family life, it is generally more of a hamperer than a help."

"You found it so, did not you?" says Althea, wishing that the picture called up by her sister's words of Miss Bateson being pitchforked from under her family roof-tree by the combined efforts of her relatives did not present itself so vividly before her mind's eye as she speaks. "And mother—that has certainly been her experience. How well she spoke! I felt as if I had never understood her before. *The pity of humanity!* Yes, that ought to be a lever strong enough to uproot one from *any* surrounding. Sometimes I have half a mind to join her."

"You would be in her way," replies Faustina hastily; "she does not want you. Enthusiasts like her can work only on their own lines; and her lines are not yours."

"I do not quite know what my line is"—dejectedly—"except to be *de trop*, and at a loose end."

"You are feeling very lonely, dearest," says Faustina in an excessively kind voice; and, with suitable action: "You must remember that it is the inevitable result of having outgrown your surroundings."

"I suppose there may be something in that," replies Althea, but with not much of the elation which the acceptance of so flattering a hypothesis might imply.

"Since it is I that have caused you the pain of

feeling that your sheath is too tight for you—and it *is* a painful process; development, growth, often are—will not you let me apply the remedy?”

“What remedy?”

“I have robbed you of a home. Do you imagine that I am ignorant that it is on account of your beautiful loyalty to me that your family have turned their backs upon you?”

“But they have not turned their backs.”

“They have made it a condition of their countenance that you should renounce me. I know that as well as if you had told me in so many words.”

This is so nearly the truth that Althea is silent.

“I have been the means of robbing you of one home; may not I”—sinking her voice, which has a quite un-put-on tremble in it—“mayn’t I offer you another—a very different one in point of luxury—but, as you have often told me, the essentials of life are what you care about—you do not mind the trappings?”

“I am absolutely indifferent to them.”

“I knew it”—in a tone of triumph. “Then, will you come and live with me? share a home where there may not be a great many silver spoons”—laughing—“but where work and aspiration and love will certainly not be lacking?”

A flush of gratitude and half-frightened pleasure rushes over Althea’s face.

"Do you mean live with you in the slums at Notting Hill? Oh, how often I have thought of the tales you have told me of your experiences there! Of the people sitting out all night upon their doorsteps in summer because they could not face the vermin in their hideous beds! Do you really think me worthy and able to share that noble life?"

Faustina changes countenance slightly.

"No, no; I was not contemplating that. That was merely a phase through which I happened to be passing. I had to live there for a while, because—because—in fact, because I was getting up the subject of the Housing of the Working Classes. But"—seeing the illumined countenance before her darken and shade into disappointment—"do not be afraid! It will be the same picture, only seen at a different angle. We can serve the Cause, *our* Cause, the Cause of Humanity, better just now in a Chelsea flat than in a Notting Hill lodging-house."

"Can we?"—brightening again—"but"—with a relapse into cloudiness—"I thought that another friend shared your life—lived with you?"

"We have agreed to part," replies Faustina gravely; "for some time we have been developing in opposite directions; she differs from me diametrically upon the employment of Infant Labour. No, darling"—with solemn tenderness—"if you bless my home with your

sweet presence, your sovereignty over my heart will be absolutely unshared."

Althea is silent, looking on the ground, while her face quivers.

"I am sure I do not know what you see in me."

CHAPTER III.

THE house is to be sold—the good solid family house—which, though since its eighteenth-century birth it has seen the senseless tide of fashion set westwards from it, is still modish enough to suit any but a very much up-to-date appetite. Some of its neighbours in the street are pointed out as having been the dwelling-places of illustrious persons; and itself, strong and stout, with its Adams garlanded walls and its Sheraton chimney-pieces, faces the world as healthily as when first it left the hands of the conscientious masons who built it. It has been the nucleus of the whole family life of the Vanes—the birthplace of the children, the point towards which all their school thoughts have set, and whence they have gone forth joyfully to the pantomime and tearfully to the dentist; in one room of which Clare had first heard her William declare his love, with a clumsiness which might have reassured her as to his ever having done it before, and in another of which Althea, kneeling, as at a Holy Sacrament, had received the last faint, fond look from her dying father's eyes.

And now it is to come to the hammer!

Even were it not so much too large for the occupancy of a single man, the Death Duties, imposed by a beneficent Legislature to make us presumably cling to life even more tightly than we have hitherto done, would render it quite impossible for Edward to inhabit the home of his fathers.

Its sale is to be preceded by that of its furniture, and the last weeks passed under its roof by the family that has so long lived in it are spent in all the ineffable discomfort of deciding what is to be kept and what abandoned; in allotting to each member their several possessions; and in seeing dislodged from their ancient places dumb objects which have been landmarks in all their lives.

By the end of a month they are all intolerably sad, dusty, and covered with hay.

Mrs. Vane has departed early, taking with her but few household goods, since she does not contemplate ever again having a fixed roof-tree—departed before the last ceremony in the Vane family which the solid old mansion is to father—the marriage of Clare.

Since it is well known to her children that the abolishment of that institution is one of their mother's Blue Roses, and that if people must enter into that iniquitous contract her opinion is decidedly in favour of their doing so at a registry-office, those children do not deplore her absence. Clare and William have a com-

monplace preference for church and psalms and "The Voice that breathed o'er Eden."

"One may as well have it decently done, since one has a wedding only once in one's life."

To which Thomas, a third time summoned from Eton for a family function, has humorously responded that "this is not a sanguine view to take, and that if luck is on her side she may have *several!*"

Thomas has not shared the dismantling work, which has told so heavily upon his relatives' spirits; nor does he share their gloom, since, indeed, it is almost as difficult to be sad at the beginning of life as it is to be gay at the end. It is rare that the grief of the young for the old survives "the flowers in their caps." The *unwise* old recognise it with bitterness. The wise accept with a pang of patient pain the ruthless, yet salutary, order of Nature.

Fanny, it is true, goes on crying intermittently through the last weeks; but in her case that does not prove much. She always likes crying; it is the solution of all her difficulties. Damp and easy they flow away, and no one has the heart to stop them.

In the honest hard work of those final days, the bodily fatigue, the pulling of heart-strings in common over the dislodged relics of dead childhood, the differences that had risen so mountain-high flatten themselves into plains. Edward has made calls upon Althea's

memory over battered toy and eviscerated picture-book for recollections of departed wars, iniquities, and junkets, and that memory has never failed to answer to the demands made upon it. But, unfortunately, it is not through adjustment of their differences, but simply by a judicious silence about them—a truce of God—that this holy calm has been arrived at. It has doubtless been aided by the temporary disappearance from the scene of Faustina, who, being no fool—and, indeed, she would have been a fool of quite phenomenal proportions if she had failed to do so—having noticed that she has no longer any foothold in the house, has for the moment effaced herself.

What the eye does not see, the heart does not feel; and possibly the sanguine young Vanes, with wishes very much father to their thoughts, believe for a short halcyon interval that her disappearance is final. They are undeceived. On the eve of the marriage, after a long day's labour, they are resting in the library—the only sitting-room still habitable, since it is to receive Clare's few wedding guests. Though some of her relatives have offered her their houses, and others have suggested a hotel, she has clung pertinaciously to the resolution to go forth to her new life from the old doors.

“I should not feel married if I were not married from here!”

The family, wearied as they are, will go out presently to dine at a restaurant, their kitchen staff being almost wholly dismissed; and meanwhile they are all together, and feeling very kind and fond toward each other. This attitude of mind is, however, not destined to be a lasting one.

"To think that this is the last evening we shall ever sit in this jolly old room!" says Thomas, setting down his teacup, and casting an eye irrepressibly jovial even while uttering this pensive ejaculation along the emptied bookshelves.

It is what they have all been feeling far too deeply to give it voice; and the sense of how unsafe in the present tender state of the family spirits is the topic, evidently hurries Edward into another, though kindred, subject.

"Thee, did you ever find that second volume of Pennant's 'London'?"

"Never."

"Someone must have borrowed it."

"Or stolen? People are so dishonest about books."

"It was almost too bulky to steal."

The subject drops; both Edward and Althea have too keen a memory, and are both too conscious of each other's thoughts of the long-ago Sunday evenings, when to have Pennant's "London" taken from its shelf, and its interleaved pictures explained by their father, had

been one of childhood's dearest treats, to find the theme any safer than the previous one. The father is dead and the book is lost. Brother and sister strangle a sigh; but again each divines the other, as their two pair of eyes, meeting in sad and affectionate understanding, testify.

"By this time to-morrow we shall be scattered to the ends of the earth!" resumes Thomas.

He is too young to remember the Pennant Sunday evenings, nor suspects the emotion working in his seniors.

"It is rather a bold metaphor to call Eton and Oxford the ends of the earth," answers Clare, laughing tremulously.

"By-the-by," continues the boy, turning abruptly towards his second sister, "where are you going to scatter to, Thee?"

It is a case of the rushing fool clearing a way for cautious angels. How the cautious angels hold their breaths! It is a query they have all wished to put, and all shrink from putting. That there is also a shrinking from answering in the person addressed is made evident by the unnecessarily long pause before she opens her mouth.

"I am not going to scatter anywhere."

"You are going to stay in London?"

"Yes."

The monosyllable stands quite alone, and is evidently intended to remain in its isolation. The rest of the family—despite the itch of angry curiosity that is beginning to irritate them—would probably leave it so; but once again the schoolboy cat pulls the chestnuts out of the fire.

“Who is going to put you up? Aunt Lavinia?”

“No.”

“The De la Poers?”

“No.”

“Where are you going, then?”

Direct, and consequently easily answered, as this inquiry would seem, it remains unresponded to long enough to have time for a derisive successor to trip up its heels.

“Have you taken an arch under Waterloo Bridge?”

Perhaps the young jeer in his tone gives the needed spur to Althea’s speech.

“No; I have not. I have taken half a flat—half Fausti—half Miss Bateson’s flat in Chelsea.”

If they had been questioned afterwards, all the family would have asseverated that they had expected nothing less; yet for a full two minutes after the shell has burst there is a generally felt sense of aghastness in the air. To the person who has thrown the bomb it is the most acutely perceptible.

“What jolly fun for you!” says Thomas, getting, as

usual, speediest possession of his powers of speech. "I wish you joy of it, and her!"

He turns on his heel as he speaks, and makes, with disdainful haste and noise, for the door. With less noise, but certainly not with less disdain, as Althea, with a heart-pang, sharply feels, Edward follows. Fanny slides inoffensively, but evidently acquiescingly, after them. Only Clare remains.

"So you are going to carry it out to the bitter end," she says in a cold voice, that yet has plainly an underlying heat beneath it.

"I do not know what you mean by 'the bitter end.'" Althea's voice is also cold, and has as much underlying warmth as her sister's. "I am going to adopt what seems to me the best line of life now within my reach."

"Better, of course, than a degraded existence with us."

The heat is beginning to pierce the thin ice-crust.

"You will be much happier leading your 'degraded existence,' as you choose to call it, by yourselves."

"We shall not be by ourselves. Fanny will be with us."

"Fanny!" in unfeigned surprise. "I thought she had decided to go to Paris to study at the Conservatoire!"

"When it came to the point, she found she could not bear to be cut adrift from us even for a time. Poor dear Fanny! she has a very loving little heart."

Clare is much too amiable a woman to have intentionally laid a weight upon the pronoun, but to Althea's ear that expressive weight is but too perceptible. She laughs.

"So my self-sacrifice was wasted! You will be the eternal three, after all."

Perhaps this idea has already had to be combated by the bride-elect, for she winces.

"Fanny does not count; we can always send her out of the room if she is *de trop*. You know how bid-dable she is, and William likes her."

"Yes, William likes her."

"It is quite a different thing, of course, from his feeling for you. His first thought, as you know, was to have you."

"And who was it planted that first thought in his breast?"—smiling with affectionate scepticism. "You may swear yourself black in the face, Clare, but I will never believe that it grew there of itself."

"I may have suggested it in the first instance, but he took it up at once."

"And now he has joyfully laid it down again!"

"I know that you never—never of late, that is—can believe in any *man* having a good or kind or noble impulse."

"I am not quite so irrational as to damn one half of creation because of the faults and selfishnesses that

ages of tyranny and the radical viciousness of the present social system have developed in them."

The whole shape and flavour of this sentence, smacking unmistakably of the source whence it sprang, make Clare feel so angry that, being a woman with a habit of self-control, she does not trust herself to speak. Althea is conscious of, and half regretful for, having been offensive, yet her next sentence, though tricked out as an *amende*, does not improve matters.

"I never doubted the existence of good men in the world. Edward is a good man. William is a good, an excellent man, according to his lights."

"*According to his lights!*"

"Yes, according to his lights. I suppose we must all walk by our own."

The modified encomium contained in this sentence, and its aroma of patronage, have the effect of vanquishing Clare's sweet temper.

"And if some of us choose to mistake for light nasty little boggy exhalations, we may chance to land our disciples in a slough."

Althea's eyes flash.

"Granting your premise, I had rather be landed in a slough while striving after light, than sit contentedly in the darkness on dry ground."

"Would you? Personally, I see no necessary opposition between light and dryness."

But the tone of the sentence is out of character with the gentle-natured speaker, and she at once drops into a more natural key.

“Oh, how dear father would have hated it! Oh, the blessed blindness and deafness of death!”

A disfiguring pucker of angry pain contracts Althea’s mouth.

“It is unjustifiable, criminal, cruel, to drag in the dead, who cannot contradict you, to your aid because you are getting worsted in an argument.”

“I deny that I am getting worsted. Would not he—can you deny that he would have hated it?—that he would have hated—detested her?”

The other hesitates a moment; then speaks with the firm clearness of assured conviction.

“I can and do deny it. He might have disliked her at first—yes, I am almost sure that he would at first—but afterwards, when he recognised the real grandeur of her character—under all the crust of prejudice that he could not help sharing with people of his date, he was so quick to recognise and so generous to allow nobility in others—dear, dear father!—he would have rated her as highly as I do, and”—firmly—“I cannot put it more strongly.”

Clare shakes her head.

“As you say, the dead cannot contradict one; and there is no use”—sadly and no longer angrily—“in

embittering our last talk by assertions and denials of what neither of us can ever now prove; but I cannot think that you have chosen well for your own happiness."

"There"—with a flush of obstinacy—"I must differ from you; and even if I did not, will you tell me what better alternative is before me? You have been in haste—you and William—to fill the place that you offered me in your home."

"In haste!"—wounded—"why, you positively refused to come to us."

"I refused because you affixed conditions that no one with a spark of honour could have complied with. No"—dropping her air of dignity, and speaking with unrepressed excitement—"that is not true. I could not have accepted in any case. I am tired of luxury and cotton-wool. I cannot get the cry of the whole travelling creation out of my ears. You may detest her, but it was Faustina who first made me really hear it."

"I do not think one needs a Faustina to make one hear that," replies Clare, with quiet contempt; but Althea does not hear her. She is walking quickly about the room with locked hands and luminous eyes. "One has so little time, too, in which to work—ten, or often twenty, useless years at the beginning of life, and perhaps five or ten helpless ones at the end. Such work to do, and only one little life to do it in."

"Only *one* life! Is that another chapter of Faustina's gospel?"

"Only one, practically—only one that we know anything about, or have any control over; and if we are to have thousands—thousands"—throwing out her hands with a gesture of unlimited extension—"to have wasted the first is *no* very good preparation for them."

"I am sure I have no wish to make you waste it," says Clare, with a half-remorseful sense of the unascetic brilliancy of her own outlook; "but I wonder, having these views, that you did not join mother in her crusade."

"I was half sorry I had not, while she was speaking; she looked so inspired. But, no"—shaking her head—"she did not really want me; and, besides, I—I cannot forget how unhappy she made him."

"And you think that this would have made him less unhappy?"

"As I told you before"—with angry excitement—"you have no right to bring him into the question."

"You have yourself just brought him in."

This is true, and silences her.

"Well," says Clare, with a deep sigh, rising as if to depart, "I am afraid I may say with Mortimer:

" 'No more of this unprofitable chat!' "

At this indication of an intention to leave her on the part of the last member of her family who had

cleaved to her, Althea's loftily-beating heart sinks. Involuntarily she stretches out her hand with a childish gesture to pull her sister back by the gown.

Clare's doorward-set face turns back, not relentingly, since there had never been any touch of hardness in her heart, but with affectionate regret.

"If ever you—I was going to say see the error of your ways, but that would be putting it offensively—if ever you see reason to change your mind——"

"I will die before I own it."

CHAPTER IV.

THE break-up has come. Clare has been united to her William, and as Mrs. William Boteler has set off on a singularly piercing afternoon to a proverbially cold county, where a friend has lent them a seldom-inhabited and sparsely-servanted country-house. It is the mode in which nowadays every couple that respects itself must begin its wedded career, though to many it may seem but a dubious improvement upon the old jolly month at Rome or trip to Paris. However, with so many new furs, and such a warm flame of love as both bride and bridegroom can boast, a thermometer at zero, and a setting of Lincolnshire fens for the jewel of their bliss, are matters of little moment.

It is not from want of furs that Althea shivers as she watches from the doorstep her sister, blinded and senselessly pelted with rice, yet obstinately radiant, disappearing into the future viâ the Great Northern Railway station. Mixed with the dull pain of loss and change is the keener sense of acute compassion. What an awful fate, to be vanishing into a fen alone with William Boteler for a whole fortnight! Not only so, but to

emerge from it at the end of that fortnight saddled with him for life, in fulfilment of that contract of which Faustina has only lately explained to her the full iniquity. She has to keep her pity to herself, since neither brothers, remaining sister, nor the few old friends who share the doorstep with her, would be likely to sympathise in it. Yet she cannot resist giving an emphatic head-shake and "Never!" to the "Well, Althea, it will be your turn next!" of a civilly-meaning old gentleman, to whom the statement that marriage is not the sole possible solution of woman's riddle would sound like gibberish. Her emphatic disclaimer is misconstrued into desponding modesty, and calls forth the encouraging rejoinder that "it is early days to despair yet."

Then comes the parting with the old house and her kindred. To the first she would have liked to bid farewell in lingering aloneness, but is baffled by a second old friend—female this time—who insists on accompanying her. She marches, therefore, quickly and stolidly through the denuded rooms aching with emptiness, and stares blankly at the unfaded patches of wall which alone mark the spots whence her lifelong friends, the dear old family Romneys and Hoppners, have descended.

Her brethren bid her good-bye, each in different wise: Thomas with the absent friendliness of one whose mental eye is fixed elsewhere; Fanny with soft ex-

pansiveness, but yet conveying clearly a gentle impression of being aware that she is deservedly in disgrace; and Edward—— Can it be from that rare good comrade of old times that she is parting with this cool handshake, supplemented, when she offers her face—not before—by a little frosty, pecking kiss?

“You will send me a line now and then?” she asks, with a wistful unwillingness to let that icy formality stand as sole adieu between them.

“I am not much of a scribe, as you know,” is his reply, turning away and wrapping Fanny, as if to accentuate the contrast between them, in his arms.

There *are* arms, however, ready to enfold Althea, though those of her own blood seem more inclined to hang limply by their sides—ready, impatient, ardent. So she finds when, having climbed the carpetless and not particularly clean stone stairs of More Mansions, Chelsea, to the fourth floor (there is no lift), she is admitted by Miss Bateson herself to the privacy of her eyrie. The strenuousness of Faustina’s embrace is grateful to the heart still shivering from the chill of its kindred’s good-byes, and her torrid words do not sound as exaggerated as in cooler moments they might be recognised to be.

“My darling! I have you at last! I was terrified lest at the final moment Philistia might triumph over

me. But here you are—here WE are—and can earth give anything better?”

To an indifferent or over-critical eye it might seem that earth must be but poorly supplied with conveniences if it could not; but the depressed and overwrought girl to whom this flight of rhetoric is addressed hears only the warm affection that dictated it, and she bursts into grateful tears.

“You are *really* glad to see me? I thought that no one was ever going to be glad to see me again. How *can* I thank you enough?”

“As if there could be any question of thanks between *us!*”

With their friendship at this high pitch of tension, they enter their now joint domain. More Mansions is one of those blocks of towering jerry buildings that have sprung up within the last three years to meet the requirements and match the purses of independent female spirits, imprudent marriages, and narrow incomes.

“It is neither large nor pretty,” says Faustina, introducing her new inmate into her minute drawing-room—“just a working woman’s room; but there will be space for a great deal of happiness in it.”

“I am sure there will!”—with an emphasis all the stronger for the pang of shame at having felt a momentary sense of dismay at the disproportion between

her own and her friend's tall figures, and the area which is to contain them.

"And we have a nice peep of the river"—pulling back the window-curtain.

"Yes, and I am so fond of the river"—looking out at its constellation of lights obliquely seen. "When one thinks of all it has carried and all it means, one feels that more than half the poetry of London belongs to it."

"Quite so"—rather absently. "And now, darling"—sitting down, and drawing Althea to her side—"let me have a good, *good* look at you. Have not I been exemplary in effacing myself all these days? If the Philistines had but known what it cost me!"

Were Althea given her choice, she would prefer that Faustina should not habitually refer to her family as "the Philistines"; but the feeling that it would be ungracious to begin to carp in these early moments of their reunion, coupled with fresh gratitude for the devotion expressed, tie her tongue. And Miss Bateson goes on, in blissful ignorance of the slight jar:

"And the Function?"—with an accent of good-humoured contempt on the noun—"how did you get through it?"

"It was not *I* that had to get through it."

"No, thank God! And whither was the victim borne afterwards?"

"To Lincolnshire, of all balmy, exhilarating places

this weather! But, dear thing! she went smiling to the block."

"They mostly do."

Althea looks pensively into the fire, burning ill-temperedly in a little shoddy grate calculated to consume the minimum of coal.

"I was told that it would be my turn next."

"Do not say such things, even in joke!"

"But for you, it might have been. Yes"—thoughtfully—"till you came I had quite as much inclination towards love and marriage as the average girl is usually credited with."

"*The average girl!*"

"It is owing to your kind partiality that I seem above the average. It sounds incredible now, but I fully intended to marry. I remember wondering how I should endure the parting from dear father. Till you lifted a corner of the veil——"

"I could have lifted it a good deal more, if you had not stopped me."

"I know—I know; but I felt I could not bear it. You need not be afraid. You told me quite enough."

Both feel that they are getting on a plane of emotion too high for everyday use, and by one consent descend to earth again.

"Would you like to see your room?"

It does not take long to see, being, indeed, of the

closet-like proportions to be expected from the scale of the rest of the flat. And once again that feeling of ignoble dismay assails Althea as she sees how entirely her boxes crowd it up, boiling over even into the squeezezy passage.

"I brought as little as I could," she says apologetically; "most of my things are warehoused."

"Do not distress yourself, beloved," says Faustina airily. "You will see they will all shake down quite comfortably in time. One has to be as economical of space as in a ship's cabin; but how was a princess like you"—laughing—"to know that? I will have a few boards knocked up over the bath in the bath-room, and your boxes, when we have unpacked them, can go there."

"Thank you," says Althea gratefully. "How much I have to learn! How one overlays one's real needs with a load of stupid superfluities! Why on earth"—in a heat of iconoclastic fury—"did I bring a dressing-bag?"

"I would keep it locked, if I were you; and I would not put the bottles and things out. I do not know much about the servant; she is new. Sarah, my last one, went off at a moment's notice; she said she found a flat so intolerably dull. And I do not know much about this one; the porter found her for me. I have not had time to look for one myself. I have had such

phenomenal press of work these last few weeks. Lucky for me that I have, or I do not know how I should have borne the absence and suspense."

For the moment Althea does not answer to the whip. Her mind is entirely occupied by the thought of how scandalously self-indulgent her whole life-scheme hitherto has been, and by the more practical wonder of how the less—her bed-chamber—can be cajoled into containing the greater—her wardrobe. The problem is still unsolved when they sit down to dinner.

"I know you do not care two straws what you eat."

This is not a very reassuring introduction to the feast, but Althea assents heartily:

"Not two straws."

She really believes what she says, and tries to go on believing it, even after experience has made clear to her that "not to care two straws" what one eats, in the sense of dining uncomplainingly on a delicate cutlet with exquisitely prepared vegetables, argues a different degree of heroism from that needed to face the gravies, bread sauces, and melted butters of the porter-found artiste of 4, More Mansions. However, it is surprising how well tinned apricots, oranges, and sardines can fill up the crevices left by the failure of more solid nutriment, and it is with a sense of true satisfaction in having begun the real working woman's existence—begun it,

not in child's play, but in sober earnest—that Althea follows her friend to the drawing-room. Eliza has almost let the fire out, which, considering the universality of her functions, might seem excusable had the past dinner—the Paysandu tongue from Harrod's Stores, with its satellite oranges and sardines—required any cooking.

The state of things is evidently not an uncommon one, as Faustina thinks it worth no notice beyond a careless, “You see, sweet, I have taken you at your word. As we begin, so we shall go on; it is what you wished, isn't it?”

“Oh, yes, yes!”

“You will get used to our little ways very quickly. When first I left home, I thought the food nasty and the beds hard; and, of course, my antecedents were far less luxurious than yours.”

“Were they? Do not you think”—watching with a slight shiver Miss Bateson's indifferent efforts to revive the all-but-dead flame—“that if you held a newspaper before the fireplace it would create a draught of air up the chimney and make it burn?”

“Certainly, darling! Give me the *Firebrand*; it is on my writing-table.”

Althea complies, and takes the journal in question from among a wilderness of papers, schedules, reports, such as reminds her of her mother's labours, and under

which groans the disproportionately large and business-like writing-table, which occupies a third of the tiny sitting-room.

Whether or not due to the inflammatory nature of the newspaper, in which it recognises a kindred element, certain it is that under its influence the all-but-extinct fire renews its youth, and races up the flue.

Faustina, who has been kneeling before it, holding up the fostering organ of sedition, subsides, first on to her heels, and then into a sitting posture on the rug, with her head leant against Althea's knees. The attitude a little shocks the disciple, as an unseemly reversal of the fit order of things; but Faustina's sigh of enjoyment arrests her protest.

"How well I am rewarded for my superhuman efforts to keep this one evening clear!"

"Did it require superhuman efforts?"—with respectful interest.

"Didn't it!"

"Do you never have a free evening?"

"Hardly ever."

"And shall I hardly ever have one, either?"—with a sort of awed excitement.

"That will depend upon the nature of your work."

"My work!" Have you thought out at all what you will put me to?"

"Put you to!" Darling, what an expression!"

"It is not in the least a figure of speech. I want you to put me to whatever you think me fittest, or I am afraid I ought to say least unfit for. I know"—sadly—"how very little untrained labour is worth."

"It will not long remain untrained; contact with real life is the education best suited to an organism like yours."

"But how—HOW am I to get into contact with it?"
Faustina hesitates a moment.

"You would be of immense advantage to the Cause upon the platform, if you could bring yourself to make the effort. I know that to you it would be a painful one at first. Your personality would——"

"Oh, no, no—not that! One platform is enough in a family."

"Will you try the pen, then?"

"I am afraid I should not be able to do much with it; but I might try."

"You might make your *coup d'essai* in *this*'—putting a forefinger upon the newspaper, which, having fulfilled its mission of reviving the fire, now lies neglected on the hearthrug.

Althea takes it up.

"Is it a new paper? I do not remember to have ever seen it before."

Miss Bateson gives a short laugh.

"You would not be very likely to meet it in *your*

milieu; but it *is* new; it has hardly begun to feel its feet yet. When it has, I think it will do valuable work; the editor is a *mate* of mine, and would put in anything I sent him."

Althea reads for a few minutes; then looks up and shakes her head:

"I am sure that I could not do anything like this." A moment later, hesitatingly: "Do you believe in conversion by calling names?"

"It might not convert you or me; but there are classes and abuses who and which can only be reached by Billingsgate."

Miss Vane thinks over this aphorism for a moment or two; but not being as yet, perhaps, quite ripe enough to assimilate its wisdom, she slides away from it.

"What I should like—what was my idea—would be to help you more directly in your own work—to "devil" for you, as it were. I am not fit to take any initiative—at least, certainly not yet—but if I could lighten your burden in any degree, I should feel that I was not quite the fly on the cart-wheel, but that I was helping it to turn ever so little."

"It is very, *very* sweet of you! As to my burden, my shoulders are broad"—laughing—"and, of course, your lovely presence—the sense of having your exquisite sympathy always to turn to—is unspeakably helpful in itself. There *is* another way, of course"—speaking less

glibly—"in which you could be of inestimable use to me and to the Cause."

"Is there?"—very eagerly—"tell it me."

"You might be of incalculable aid socially."

"*Socially?*"

"Yes, socially. I am continually being brought up against the dead wall of not being able to get at the Wire-pullers themselves."

"I do not quite understand."

"When I am getting up any subject, social or political, I am often crippled by my inability to reach the people who could best post me in it. I have to fall back on Blue-books and Acts of Parliament, and such-like dry bones, when I could attain my end twice as efficiently, and with a hundredth part of the time and trouble, by half an hour's judicious picking of a Secretary's or Under-Secretary's brains."

"Only that you cannot get at them?"

"Very often I cannot; you may be sure"—with a shrewd laugh—"that if I can, I do not let the grass grow under my feet."

"But I do not see how I am to help you."

"Do not you? That is because you do not realise the value of your own social charm."

"But even if I did?"

Faustina has raised her head from Althea's knees,

and her eyes are looking with a very business-like, sharp brightness in them into her friend's.

"I am shipwrecked upon two opposite rocks: either the planets I am in search of move in a different orbit to mine—to speak candidly, they do not and will not know me (I am getting a little mixed in my metaphors, but you must not mind that)—or else they know me too well, and flee when they see me coming."

"And how can I arrest their flight?"

"They would not suspect you; your sweet face, your beautiful clothes——"

"They are almost all warehoused."

"No doors would be shut to you. Your name, the status of your family—oh! I do not undervalue these advantages—would open to you naturally houses into which I have—often unsuccessfully—to manœuvre an entrance. You are born to opportunities, which I have to struggle for in the sweat of my brow, but which, through you, I might utilise almost as well as if they were my own."

Althea does not immediately answer. She looks into the fire with a cloudy brow.

"Do you mean," she says at last, "that I am to go into society with the object of taking people off their guard and surprising their confidence?"

"You may put it that way if you choose, though in justice to myself"—with a slightly wounded intonation—

"I must say that I think my suggestion was capable of a nobler construction."

Althea remains for another minute or two in silent and distinctly unpleasant thought, nor do her friend's next words much improve her mental position:

"You must remember, darling, that I did not volunteer the proposal, if you can give it so definite a name. You asked me to tell you how, in my opinion, you could best serve the Cause, and I answered as directly and truthfully as I knew how; but since the idea is so repellent to you, let us never return to it."

There is a short interval of awkward silence, ended by the younger woman breaking into apologetic speech.

"You make me feel as if I were such a moral coward! I dare say that my objection to your plan was only due to personal distaste, shrinking from the disagreeable. You must own that at the first blush it had a little look of treachery. Will you let me think it over, and try to disentangle the merely personal motive from the other? I confess it is not a pleasant idea to me; but, after all"—reflectively—"it is not the pleasant that I have come to seek."

The last clause of this sentence is scarcely susceptible of a flattering interpretation as regards Miss Bateson's surroundings; but the latter is so much relieved by the, at least, partially restored docility of her catechumen that she does not quarrel with it.

CHAPTER V.

THE joint establishment in More Mansions is now five days old. Althea has discovered that many things, which she has hitherto considered as much a matter of course as the diurnal revolution of the earth, are for the future only to be looked upon as delightful and unexpected accidents, or as to be done without altogether. She has discovered how very late a general servant can get up in the morning; how very cold a hot bath can be; and how crumpled a tablecloth. She is also in a position to decide between the comparative claims to victory over the nose of the two detestable smells of water spilt on a stove, and of paraffin slopped over a cheap lamp. Her diet, since her rebellious palate is not yet tamed to accept the alternate and sometimes mingled greases, rawnesses, and burnings of Eliza's infant art, over which Faustina's rides serenely victorious, has been chiefly that of a monkey in the tropics—viz., oranges, bananas, and cocoa-nuts. Since at the end of nearly a week of this innutritious fare she is not in perceptibly worse case than at the beginning,

she makes the reflection how grossly she must have overeaten herself during the whole of her former life.

As to Faustina, she belongs to that class of persons—there is a large one—to whom the minor discomforts of life are matters of absolute indifference. Her iron health and steel nerves enable her to face almost any kind of food without aversion; nor is it apparently of the least moment to her whether the spoon with which she sups her porridge is misty or bright.

Once or twice, it is true, she has broken into tender expletives of admiration at the heroism with which her friend braves the change for the worse in her material conditions; but these expressions have always been attended with an implication that to one cast in Althea's mould the material "worse" is more than balanced by the moral "better."

Once or twice she has also given utterance to a slight intention of "sacking" Eliza if she does not improve. But though this condition of her stay is never fulfilled, that unsuccessful artiste stays on. Were she a good cook, indeed, her powers would be severely tried by the erratic nature of the times and seasons to which she has to subdue her art. In 4, More Mansions no food either is or is supposed to be served at any particular hour. The dinner which on Monday is prematurely snatched between two meetings is on Tuesday prorogued to midnight, after a concert or dramatic

entertainment at a people's hall, or some heated political or social platform work at a federated women's club.

The project of social utility for Althea has, to her relief, not again been broached; but she cannot reproach herself with having been idle. In the short and breathless intervals of their public appearances she has "devilled" incessantly for Faustina, the heat of her zeal more than making up for any lack of practice. She has been the means of spreading a great deal of inflammatory literature, against which, if her taste revolts, her sense of blazing indignation at the abuses forcibly, if somewhat scurrilously, lashed carries her triumphantly through. Occasionally, it is true, she utters a hesitating protest.

"Do you think we need be *quite* so abusive?" she asks, pausing over a sentence even more violently vituperative than its predecessors.

"One cannot cure a gangrene with rose-water," replies Miss Bateson forcibly.

"True, but"—still more tentatively—"do not you think our arguments are weighty enough in themselves to be even more effective if put temperately?"

"No great battle was ever won with wooden swords or pea-shooters."

"What a born fighter you are, Faustina!" says Althea, leaning back for a moment's rest in her chair,

and looking with a half-amused and yet whole hearted admiration up at her companion. "No doubt you are right—you who have given up your whole life to fight this Hydra. It was a *grand* thing to do"—her voice slightly quivering in the ardour of her affectionate homage.

"It is not grand when you cannot help doing a thing. My heart burned within me, as the old Book says; and, grand or no, it is an easy thing to do, now that I have you to support me with your exquisite faith and courage, after having worked alone all my life."

"*Alone!* But you had Miss Lewis."

"She was a faddist; she went her own selfish way. I never was so disillusioned about anyone in my life."

Althea pauses, once again, in spite of herself, jarred.

"How soon do you expect to be disillusioned about me?"

"How soon? *When all the seas run dry.*"

Such a declaration cannot help but be followed by an embrace, and then they return to business.

"Now that you have given me the heads, told me the sense in which you wish these letters answered, I can get through them perfectly well by myself. I am really growing quite expert with the typewriter. How long do you expect to be away?"

"You may be quite sure as short a time as I possibly can"—using the tone with which in old days that contemptible survival, a man in love, was wont to part from his mistress. "I would take you with me, only that——"

"Only that what?"

"I think it might be premature; as I have explained to you, the handful of friends I am going to meet and I are in the habit of dealing with a class of subjects which, though they need airing badly, I think you are as yet scarcely ripe for the discussion of."

"I am ripening very fast. Well, I am willing to abide by your judgment."

With an emotional encomium on her sweet persuadableness, Miss Bateson bids her friend farewell; and Althea settles down without an instant's delay to the typewriter.

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Two hours later a man rings the bell of No. 4. One would have thought that, if he were an intending caller upon Miss Bateson, he might have spared himself the trouble of the climb after seeing the "Out" appended to her name downstairs. Yet it cannot be to Miss Vane that he means to pay that civility; at least, there is no look of recognition on her face when she appears in the doorway in answer to his summons. But, then, her whole manner is so *bouleversé*, her expression one of

such preoccupied consternation, that it is quite possible she might have failed to recognise her own nearest relatives.

"I beg your pardon"—taking off his hat with a very well-bred air—"I must apologise for my intrusion; but though I saw that Miss Bateson was out, I thought I might leave a message with her servant."

"The *servant!*"—regarding him with a distraught look. "Something has happened to her; she has been taken suddenly ill."

"Indeed!"

"I was afraid to leave her, or would have sent the porter for a doctor."

"Could I be of any use?"

"Oh, thank you"—with an eyebeam of heartfelt relief and gratitude—"indeed you could."

"Is it Sarah?"

"No; Sarah left a week ago."

He smiles slightly—a smile which, were she less flurried, might convey to her mind that the tenure of domestic service in More Mansions was not apt to be a long one.

"I was writing in the drawing-room, when I heard a loud noise as of something very heavy falling. You know that one hears everything very plainly in these flats, and I rushed into the kitchen, and found her lying on the floor, with her head under the table."

“With her head under the table?”

“Yes; I think it must be a fit; but, as I have never seen a person in a fit, I cannot be sure.”

She is speaking very rapidly, and her troubled eye casts at him a hurried look of inquiry as to whether he may be better informed in this branch of science than she.

“May I come in and have a look at her? I might lift her up, and, whatever ails her, I am sure her head ought not to be left under the table.”

They have so far been standing on the threshold, Althea with the door in her hand; but she now joyfully gives ground, and, fully admitting her deliverer, leads him with precipitate steps to the scene of the tragedy. The kitchen—a cupboard in size—is seen, when they reach it, to be nearly filled by the prone body of a woman, who is stretched flat upon the tiles. From under the table proceed stertorous sounds, which prove that at least she is not dead.

“She has been making those dreadful noises ever since I first found her,” says Althea in an agitated voice.

Her companion’s answer is first to stoop over, then kneel down on one knee beside, the object of their attention. He lifts her head carefully, and looks scrutinisingly into the flushed and disfigured features.

“Is it a fit?” asks the girl in an awestruck whisper.

He shakes his head, and, replacing the dishevelled head on the floor, rises again to his feet.

"You need not make yourself uneasy; there is nothing the matter with her."

"*Nothing the matter with her?*"

"Nothing, beyond being dead drunk."

Once again, in defiance of good manners, Althea repeats his words, but this time accompanied by a start of shocked horror.

"Dead drunk! But those awful noises she is making?"

"They are only snores." She is struck dumb. "Did you never see a woman under the inspiration of gin before?" he asks, with an accent of interested curiosity.

"No—yes—I suppose so, in the street."

"I have seen a good many."

"What *am* I to do with her?" gazing down in stupefaction at the vanquished votary of alcohol. "I do not know when—it may be quite late—Faus—Miss Bateson will be back."

"If you will allow me, I will carry this woman into her bedroom and lay her on her bed to sleep it off. She will be all right when she wakes."

"Oh, *would* you? I *should* be grateful! But can you manage it alone, without help? Let me lift her feet."

“*Pray* do not touch her!”—hastily—“I am quite up to carrying her. She will not be heavy. These sort of women never are.”

He is as good as his word, and, having fished out and grasped with adroit strength the recumbent Eliza, bears her in triumph to her bower. Though of a wizened, East-End type, she is, like any other perfectly inert mass, a good weight, and for a minute after laying her down he draws his breath a little hard.

“I am afraid you found her very heavy?”

“Not at all, thank you.”

“And you think”—looking at the still snoring heap with an expression in which the compassion tries conscientiously to master the disgust, and is not completely victorious—“that when she wakes she will be all right?”

“In all probability.”

“But supposing that she is not all right? That when she wakes up she is still intoxicated? and that she tries to set fire to the flat, or something of the sort? If Miss Bateson is not come back, if I am alone, how shall I be able to cope with her?”

“She will probably not stir before to-morrow morning; but, if you would allow me, I could obviate any danger of the kind you fear by staying with you—remaining here till Miss Bateson’s return.”

His proposal makes her look at him—she can

scarcely be said to have done so before—in order to see whether the source from which this suggestion flows makes it seem a preferable one to the alternative of a *tête-à-tête* with Eliza. Unless “burglar” or “murderer” be written in letters of fire upon the brow of the proposer, it can scarcely be a less desirable one. Apparently her eyes find no such prohibitory sentence inscribed, for she answers without any perceptible hesitation:

“It would be an act of real Christian charity. But are you sure that it is not putting you to inconvenience?—that you can spare the time?”

“Perfectly sure.”

She throws what he thinks, what most people would think, an extremely pretty look of silent gratitude at him, and after a moment says interrogatively:

“We need not stay here, need we? In her present state she cannot do any harm?”

“None.”

“And the walls are so thin that we should hear in an instant if she stopped snoring?”

“Should we?”

Without more delay, she leads him away into the drawing-room. At her invitation he sits down. She does the same, and at once, for the first time, they both begin to feel shy. To neither of them is it a very usual sensation. Althea has lived in “the world” all

her life, and that one scanning look she had cast at him but now has revealed to her that, if one can trust to appearances, so has he. He is quite aware, with a tickling inward amusement, that he had been weighed in the balance against a drunken cook; but he feels no resentment. It is impossible since they have probably a long spell of each other's undiluted company ahead of them, that they can content themselves with a reciprocal silent appraising. They must find a topic of conversation; but in their absolute ignorance of each other, an ignorance which extends even to their very names, what can it be? With the superior ready-wittedness of woman, Althea hits upon one.

"You will excuse my asking, but are you by any chance the editor of the *Firebrand*?"

They seem fated to re-echo each other's utterances:

"*The editor of the 'Firebrand'!* Well, no, I am not."

In answering he has, or seems to have, flushed slightly, a transient heat of complexion which in a moment fades into a smile, but which tells her that her "hit" has been anything but a "palpable" one.

"Might I ask you in return why you thought I was?"

"My reason was a ridiculously inadequate one"—the flush is hers now. "You said that you had a message to leave for Miss Bateson; and before she went out

she said she hoped the—the person we are speaking of would not call in her absence; so I put two and two together.”

“When one does that, my experience is that they almost always make *five*.”

“They evidently have in this case.”

He seems glad of an excuse to laugh—a laugh which takes him helplessly, like a cough, at intervals throughout the following hour, and which he vainly tries to explain away.

She endeavours with equal futility to palliate her mistake.

“I need not tell you that I have never seen Mr. —— I do not even know his name. Miss Bateson always speaks of him by a—a sobriquet.”

“Yes, I know she does.”

His eye rests on the typewriter, and thence flashes back for an instant to Althea’s hatless head, drawing the obvious induction from both.

“You are staying with Miss Bateson?”

“I am living with her.”

“Oh, indeed!”

It is clear that he is trying to keep his words politely colourless, but interested enlightenment will pierce through their neutral tint, so much so that Althea cannot forbear putting a question in her turn.

“Did you know my—my predecessor, Miss Lewis?”

Again that recurrent, helpless laugh seems inclined to master him, but instead he masters it.

"Oh, rather! I beg your pardon—yes, I did know that lady."

Miss Vane turns it over in her mind whether it would be strictly honourable to the absent to ask this young man what her forerunner—a forerunner whose light had evidently gone out in darkness, and about whom Faustina maintains for the most part a reticence divined to be hostile—was like. She decides that it would not.

"I not only knew Miss Lewis, but *her* predecessor."

"*Had* she a predecessor?"

"Oh yes, more than one."

Althea starts slightly. She feels as if a sharp pebble had hit her—small, but unexpected. It takes her a moment or two to recover.

"You are evidently an old acquaintance of Miss Bateson."

"Very old. I have known her since I was in petticoats. Has she never mentioned me to you?"

"She *may* have done"—a tiny smile turning up the corners of her mouth—"but you must remember that I——"

"Of course—of course! May I give you my card?"

It is a nice and difficult feat in the lesser manners to inform yourself as to a person under his or her very

nose, but Althea, though it makes her feel shy, does it gracefully.

"Thank you"—laying down the card on the table beside her, her consciousness enriched by the knowledge that she is in the company of Mr. John Trecothick Drake. "My name is Althea Vane."

This is good as far as it goes, but at first it does not seem going to take them much further. In her world Althea has met Drakes, and since her first impression that he belongs to the same world as herself has now grown to conviction, he has no doubt come across Vanes there; but how he may be related to *her* Drakes is as obscure to her as what affinity she may have to *his* Vanes is to him.

After a moment she begins, with delicate subtlety that yet looks simple, to explore further.

"You have a West-Country sound."

"Yes, I come from Devonshire."

"So does Miss Bateson. One always"—smiling—"has the silly notion that two people who inhabit the same county or continent must live cheek by jowl."

"That is exactly how we did live. Miss Bateson is the daughter of—of one of our nearest neighbours."

"Oh-h!"

The "Oh-h!" is thoughtful, lengthened, and expresses enlightenment. If her *vis-à-vis*, with his high nose, his admirable coat, and faultless utterance, differ

strangely from such of Faustina's men friends as have hitherto met Althea's eye and ear—friends whose speech is either heavily bebrogued, or gives that supremacy which it has lately gained among the masses to the vowel *I*—the explanation lies in the fact of their having sported together in childhood among the Devonshire buttercups. The thought had certainly crossed her mind—instantly and remorsefully chased away for its unworthiness—that he is too much like a gentleman to be an intimate of Faustina's.

“Then, you know her family?”

“Oh yes, of course.”

“They are, I believe, not—not at all worthy of her.”

“Has she told you so?”

“No-o—oh no, certainly not. She would not condescend to say anything in detraction of them beyond—beyond——”

He waits, politely expectant, but not helping her to a word, as he might so easily do. She has to set off upon a remodelled sentence:

“I gathered it from the fact of her having had to leave home through her faithfulness to her convictions. If the species of persecution to which she was exposed——”

“*Persecution!*”

“Yes, persecution”—firmly.

He looks upon the floor, and once again she has reason to suspect that he is struggling with a laugh.

"They certainly did not hit it off particularly well."

The entire lack of fervour in this utterance brings the blood to her face.

"As far as I have heard, light and darkness never have hit it off particularly well since the world began."

He lifts his downcast orbs, and looks at her with a pleased gravity.

"Miss Bateson and I are companions in iniquity," he says deliberately. "If her family are not worthy of her, neither are mine of me."

She glances at him with a quickened interest. Hitherto his outside advantages have done him rather disservice than otherwise with her, as proclaiming him to belong to that *régime* which she has renounced.

"Do you mean——"

"I mean——"

The ting of the electric bell breaks into his answer. Faustina has returned.

CHAPTER VI.

“So that is the new enthusiasm, is it?”

The collapse of her cook has been explained to Miss Bateson, and has been received with that philosophic indifference by which she is wont to baffle the lesser blows of fate.

“She is no loss. Until I find another, we can turn into an A B C for food. Is not it a blessing for me”—addressing the man—“that Althea does not care a straw what she eats?”

Althea’s spirit is not yet so chastened as to escape a slight prick of indignation at hearing her Christian name thus made free with to a perfect stranger; and partly to conceal an irritation of which she is ashamed, partly out of delicacy, she leaves the two friends together.

The man lights a cigarette, and, leaning his shoulder against the chimney-piece, gives utterance to the sentence above quoted:

“So that is the new enthusiasm, is it?”

“If you choose to put it so”—lighting up too.

"It is a more comprehensible ardour than the last; but if you will excuse my putting it so, she does not look cut quite on *our* pattern."

"*Our!*"—with a withering glance at the elegance of his *tout ensemble*.

"Yes, *our!* I suppose I may be allowed to have given proofs of my right of citizenship, even though a few old clothes survive from my unregenerate state. Are you determined never to take me to your heart until I am dressed wholly from a slop-shop?" His tone is one of careless intimacy, slightly touched with an in-offensive impertinence.

"However much her outside may belie her——"

"I am far from objecting to it."

"She *is* one of us!"

"Is she?"

"She is prepared to go as far as anybody. She is very keen about the vote, perfectly sound upon the Marriage Question, and her opinion of men is, if possible, lower than mine."

He receives this last thrust with perfect equanimity.

"She is a very valuable acquisition. And how long do you think she will last?"

"*Last!*"

"Yes; how long before she follows poor Lewis to Limbo?"

The question is a provocative one; but Faustina's

temper is nearly, if not quite, up to the level of her nerves and her digestion.

"She asked me that question herself this very day."

"And what did you answer?"

"It is not of the least consequence what I answered."

He stands thoughtful, the end of his cigarette between his finger and thumb.

"In what direction do you mean to utilise her? She does not look much like a hewer of wood or drawer of water."

"It is very kind of you to be so much interested about her. But do not disquiet yourself; she will find her proper sphere."

"What is her history? How did you get hold of her? Is she an isolated fact? and if not, how did her relations allow you to spirit her away?"

"It was no case of spiriting; she has broken with her family deliberately for the sake of her opinions."

"Like you!"

There is a suspicion of the same laugh as had puzzled Althea in his voice, but Faustina apparently does not notice it, unless to it is due the tartness of her response.

"Like *you*, too; only that her vocation is a much more genuine one than yours."

"Thank you."

"Not that you"—relenting—"have not given some good proofs of your sincerity."

"Thank you."

"But that paltry levity of yours makes one doubt that you can ever be really in earnest about anything."

"Thank you. I am growing so surfeited with sweets that I think I shall wish you good-evening."

Apparently they understand each other, for she lets him go without remonstrance.

"What is the editor of the *Firebrand* like?" asks Althea that same evening, apparently apropos of nothing.

"*Like!* How do you mean?"

"Like to look at. Is he prepossessing in appearance?"

Faustina's wide-awake eyes open even more fully than usual.

"*Prepossessing!* Good Lord, no! Why should he be? He is a man of the people, and he looks it. Why do you ask?"

"You have mentioned him so often, that I thought it would be as well to have some idea of his appearance, in case he called when you were out," replies Miss Vane, not quite candidly.

Faustina hangs her dark head luxuriously backwards over the top of her chair—it is one of her rare moments of inaction—and blows the smoke of her cigarette through her nostrils.

"Prepossessing!" she repeats presently. "Darling, have not you yet learnt that we workers have no time to spare for the graces?"

"Then, your visitor of to-day"—a slight slowness in bringing out the query—"is evidently not a worker?"

"He looked a preposterous dandy," replies Miss Bateson, with a scorn that yet sounds lenient; "but then, as you know, the habits of a lifetime are not shaken off in a day; and it is Sunday, isn't it? Oh yes! the bells here in London never give one a chance of forgetting that fact. But despite his silly fopperies, there is stuff—yes, real stuff—in John Drake."

"How has he shown it?"

Faustina sits up, as if to give a more marked emphasis to her reply.

"By chucking twenty thousand pounds a year." Althea has sat up, too, her eyes alight with coming admiration. "His father owns a chemical factory in the East End, and when John found the poisonous conditions under which the hands spent their lives, he refused to touch a penny of money wrung from the wretchedness of hundreds of his fellow-creatures; and as his father entirely declined to listen to any suggestions for bettering those conditions, he threw up the whole thing, and old Trecothick has since absolutely disinherited him."

"*Trecothick!* I thought his name was *Drake!*"

"His mother was a Drake; and the old sweater was so pleased at having married into one of the best Devonshire families that he took her name."

"Twenty thousand a year!" repeats Althea in an awed voice. "How magnificent! And what injustice one does people!"

"Do not fall into the other extreme, dearest, and make a hero of him! He is still better off than five-sixths of the human race. His mother's money—she died when he was a child—came to him. It amounts to several hundreds a year."

"Several hundreds! But he gave up many thousands!"

"Yes, he did; and I am sure I have no wish to minimise the sacrifice. I only wanted to guard you against your generous tendency to idealise—a tendency by which I have so magnificently profited."

"He hinted at some vital difference of opinion with his family; but I never, never dreamed——" She breaks off.

"What did he tell you? In what connection did he introduce the subject?"

"We were talking of you."

"Of *me*?"—a little sharply.

"He was saying that he had been wronged by his family in the same way as you had been by yours."

Faustina's cheek-bones take on for a second a dim, dark flush.

"Did he tell you anything more about me?"

"He said that you were the daughter of one of his nearest neighbours."

The flush pales into a relieved, dry smile.

"That was a euphemism. I am the daughter of old Trecothick's bailiff—none of your gentlemen bailiffs: a common working farmer. I wonder that John Drake has not known me long enough to know that I glory in the class from which I spring. If I were not a working woman by necessity, I should certainly be one by choice."

Althea acknowledges this noble sentiment by an appreciative look; but that her thoughts are still rather with the absent hero than the present heroine is made plain by her next words:

"Has he any profession?"

"I believe he used to suppose that he hung about the Law Courts, but his real work is in connection with the Settlement down at Canning Town. He lives there for months at a time, organising meetings, giving lectures, and so forth."

"Appearances are deceitful," says Althea, with soft thoughtfulness. "He does not look like it."

"Probably he thinks that you do not look like it, either."

The topic drops; but it gives Althea a new feeling towards the subject of it when next he appears on her horizon.

"Darling," says Faustina, one morning after the union of the friends has lasted for a month, "did not you tell me that you wished to visit your family? Would not to-day be a good opportunity? I could spare you better to-day than most days, because I have a person coming to speak to me on business in the afternoon?"

"Business that I am not to hear?" replies Althea, with affectionate playfulness at the absurdity of the idea.

"*Business that you are not to hear!* How can you be so absurd? My beloved"—seeing a look of unaffected surprise on Althea's face at the unwonted tartness of her tone—"you make me wince when you hint at such a possibility as any concealment between us, even in play."

"To-day will suit me admirably. Dear things!"—with an accent of hesitating tenderness. "I do not know whether they will care to see me; but I shall be very, *very* glad to see them again."

Faustina turns away, having summoned up an expression of suffering to her strong face.

"You need not be jealous," says the other, laying a reassuring hand upon her companion's shoulder. "Fondly as I love them, I still think I have chosen the better part."

She says it with conviction—says it over to herself on her way—even while little waves of expectant, if rather nervous, pleasure keep running over her—even when, from the top of her bus, she sees Aunt Lavinia rolling along Piccadilly in her victoria, unconscious of the eye of her *déclassé* young relative stooping admiringly, yet not enviously, down upon the feathers in her bonnet and the little coal-black toy Spitz by her side from her vulgar eyrie.

When the bus stops, she steps gingerly down the dirty stair, anxiously guarding her skirts.

She has dressed carefully, being anxious not to prejudice her family still further against the line of life she has adopted by any deterioration in her appearance.

There is still a short distance to be walked before reaching the house, in a good Mayfair street, which the William Botelers have taken on lease. The William Botelers! How hard it is to picture Clare as one half of “the William Botelers”!

As she nears her goal, misgivings get the upper hand of hope in her breast. What sort of a welcome will she get? She has come unasked.

After all, how little notice they have taken of her since the schism that separated her from them! She has written three—or is it four?—times to Edward, and been answered—for it *is* an answer—by blank silence.

Fanny has sent her nothing but the conventional

love that nobody gives and nobody cares to take, in Clare's last letter; and Clare!—Clare's two letters have had that aroma of sweet, tactful kindness which breathes from all her gracious words and deeds; but, oh, how unlike they have been to the close-scribbled outpourings of her girlhood, when the sisters happened to be parted for even a day! In these she has "writ large," to hide the poverty of her topics, and even so has had to swell one starved page by comments on a political incident. Two years ago, what world-convulsion not affecting their two selves would have found a place in their crowded pages?

She has reached the door, and her heart beats quickly as she rings. How many of these now-alarming dear ones will she have to face? William—the excellent, insufferable William—will, thank God! be certainly at the Stock Exchange; Edward at Balliol, Thomas at Eton. It is only gentle Clare and childish Fanny whom she is needlessly bracing her nerves to meet. Yet the trepidation of her spirit does not subside as she sits in the empty drawing-room, while the butler goes in search of his mistress.

The room is softly brilliant in dazzlingly clean paint and gilding, delicate pompadour satin hangings, wedding-presents, and countless flowers. It strikes Althea, as she sits there, how little time it takes one entirely to change one's standpoint in life. It is scarcely five weeks

since she left civilisation, and yet it is with something of the wondering stare of an inhabitant of Poplar or Stratford that she is surveying the pretty luxuries of her sister's room. She has seen scores of such rooms, and knows that there exist in London tens of thousands of them, though perhaps, as a rule, not quite so clean, since it is only a small minority that have been freshly decorated by an ardent bridegroom for his bride.

“*Thee!* this is nice!”

Clare has entered without her visitor hearing her step, and in a second her warm arms are round the runagate. With a sort of sob in her throat the latter realises that Clare, at all events, is all right.

“Will you have me to luncheon?”

“*Will I?*”

“And shall I have the luck to keep you to myself?”

The other hesitates.

“Fanny is here, of course.”

“Has Fanny begun to count? She never used to do so.”

“And Ned is up for the night.”

“Dear old Ned! How glad I shall be to see him!”

The ejaculation is a quavering one, and falls rather flat.

“And I have invited a girl, a friend of his, at his request, to meet him.”

"A girl? Oh!"

"A very nice girl—Miss Delafield."

"Lady Lanington's daughter?"

"Yes; do not you remember her ball last year, when the electric light went out?"

"Perfectly."

For a minute silence falls between them, Althea, and probably Clare, too, musing upon the gulf that parts them from that darkened entertainment.

"How pretty your house is!"

"It will be, I hope. We are rather in the rough still."

"*In the rough!*"—smiling sardonically.

There is perhaps something unintentionally challenging in Miss Vane's tone, for her sister looks frightened.

"I dare say the expression applied to a room like this sounds ridiculously affected to you, who have been seeing so much of the 'seamy side' of life. You would"—with an apprehensive glance towards the door—"hardly have time to tell me anything about it before luncheon—I mean, it would not be worth while to begin, would it?"

"Do not be afraid. I am not going to begin."

She says it with a laugh, but it is a mirth that covers a good deal of wounded feeling. They are both relieved at Fanny's entrance. Fanny is quite glad to

see Althea; and so she is to see the two luncheon-seeking young men who presently appear; so she is to see Miss Delafield. The latter is one of those lofty-statured, porcelain-textured, exquisitely groomed young creatures who may be seen on any fine morning, between February and August, in considerable numbers, doing infinite credit to their country in the shops and on the pavement of Sloane Street.

Sisters know each other terribly well, and it is obvious to the intruding one that Mrs. Boteler's anxiety as to herself is heightened since the arrival of "Edward's friend." Her look travels oftener doorwards, and presently Althea sees her slip quietly out of the room. She knows as well as if she had been told in words that Clare has heard Edward's foot on the stairs, and is hasting to tell him of the culprit's presence, so that his jaw may not drop too perceptibly on catching sight of her.

The precaution is not so very successful, after all. Nothing can be more chilling than the eye and hand with which he salutes her. She feels so hurt and mortified that, when they go down to luncheon, she chooses a seat as far from him as the size of the table will admit.

She finds herself beside one of the other young men. She knows him slightly, but he is so entirely in the dark as to her present mode of life, so determined that she

is living with her sister, it is so impossible to enlighten him without annoying her family by her revelation, that their talk is one series of misunderstandings on his part, and parrying awkward questions on hers. He cannot think what has happened to her, and, as soon as courtesy will admit, turns with relief to his other neighbour, Fanny. Upon the sunny brooklet of her small glib talk, vaguely flattering, as every man who converses with her feels, though none could explain why, Althea presently sees and hears him sail away twenty knots an hour.

Since the chair on her left is filled by an old cousin of William Boteler's, who had come in late, and is too much occupied pouring scraps of Boteler family news into Clare's attentive ear to notice her, she is left to the enjoyment of her luncheon, which seems to her extraordinarily delicious. She reproaches herself for the acute pleasure her palate derives from it, contrasting herself with Faustina.

After the ladies have returned to the drawing-room, she finds Miss Delafield accosting her, and civilly recalling herself to her memory.

They are both still standing, when, the men having immediately followed them, Edward makes straight as a die for the little group. At the same moment the youth who had so resolvedly misunderstood Althea at luncheon

asks Miss Delafield a question, and she, turning a little to answer it, leaves the brother and sister *tête-à-tête*.

"Can you spare me a little bit of notice from metal more attractive?" Althea asks in a friendly if rather nervous low voice.

"Yes," he answers; "I wish to speak to you. Would you mind coming into the back drawing-room for a moment?"

She gives glad assent, and follows him.

"I *am* flattered," she says, with a slight meaning smile thrown back towards the room they have left. "This is a compliment! Dear old boy! how pleasant it is to see you again!"

When you have led a person apart with no other design than to administer to him or her a pungent snub, it is awkward to have the conversation opened in such a spirit as this by the intended recipient, and for a moment Edward is taken aback.

"I will not keep you a moment," he says in half-apology; "I only want to ask a favour of you."

"A favour?"

"Yes, a favour. I saw you just now in conversation with Miss Delafield."

"Why should not I be in conversation with her?"

He is silent.

"It was she who addressed me, not I her."

"I am not finding fault with you. You have, of

Dear Faustina.



course, a perfect right to talk to whom you choose. What I was going to ask you was, as I told you, a favour."

"What favour?"

Her smile has died away, and her voice is dry and hard.

"It is only that in any future conversation you may have with her——"

"I have not the slightest desire to have any future conversations with her."

He reddens.

"I dare say not. I do not think that you would have much in common."

"She asked me whether I remembered the electric light going out at their ball last year, and I said 'Yes, I did.'"

"All I wished to ask you was that, in case you did talk to her, you would refrain from airing your peculiar views to her."

Althea turns pale and bites her lip, but the action does not succeed in keeping in the gibing answer:

"You are behind the times. Do not you know that philanthropy is the *fashion*?"

His retort is not less gibing:

"Philanthropy! Yes; I was not alluding to philanthropy."

CHAPTER VII.

THE rest of the party have dispersed, and Althea sits on a sofa beside Clare, her eyes brimming with angry tears. Miss Delafield, their innocent occasion, has, in going away, under Edward's very nose, asked for her address, and for leave to call upon her, and she has bungled and stammered in her efforts to evade the little civility. Her wounded spirit would have carried her out of the house at once had not Clare, by an imploring sign, urged her to stay. Mrs. Boteler had seen the expression of the two faces on their return from their trip to the back drawing-room, and is now engaged in pouring balm into the hurts of the worst mauled of the two combatants.

"He is in love; people in love are always unjust."

"He spoke to me in a way that was perfectly unjustifiable."

"Did he? He always *was* rather peppery; but I think he wanted to make you an *amende*. He would have liked to shake hands with you, only that you turned so resolutely away."

"And now, perhaps, he will be killed in a railway

accident going back to Oxford," says Althea lugubriously, one large tear bursting from its dyke and running down her nose.

Clare laughs.

"That *is* piling on the agony!"

"What harm did he suppose I should do the girl?"—with a fresh burst of indignation.

"Perhaps"—hesitatingly—"he was a little afraid that you might inoculate her with your views of marriage."

"What does he know about my views of marriage? He has never had the fairness to let me state them."

"Do not you think that, if two people know that they differ fundamentally upon a subject, silence is the wisest course?"

"No, I do not; I like fresh air. I think that there is no subject that is not the better for ventilation."

Mrs. Boteler gives a slight inward shudder. There is such a whiff of Faustina about this last sentence. It takes a minute to conquer her repulsion. Before she can ask, "You go on liking your life?" Althea has captured her errant teardrop, and her eyes sparkle bright and dry.

"It is hardly a question of liking. If you mean, do I still think I have chosen wisely, I answer emphatically, in spite of you all, in spite of Ned"—faltering—"Yes, I do."

Clare looks at her wistfully. She would like to put a great many questions as to the details of that life which has thinned her sister's face, and yet lit it with such a fire of enthusiasm; but the intense distaste which she shares with the rest of her family for alluding, even obliquely, to Miss Bateson keeps her silent.

"You have grown thin!"

"Have I? That only proves that I added superfluous flesh to all my other superfluities."

Altogether it is not a great success, though Clare at parting gives her a close, sisterly hug, and says ruefully:

"I do not like to let you go. I want to keep you and fatten you up. I do not believe that that wo—I mean, I am sure you have not enough to eat."

It is with a lump in her throat that Althea, from the summit of her return bus—she has grown in the last five weeks a past-mistress in the colours of those puzzling vehicles—reflects upon her family. How nice they all looked—how much handsomer than she had remembered them! and how well they do without her!

They did not ask her one question as to the great and heart-rending subjects which have burnt all other and lesser interests out of her own life. They did not show, because they did not feel, the least concern for the tens of thousands of stunted, starved, and poisoned lives running parallel to their own wadded satin ones.

What tales she could have told them of the hopeless women, and dwindled little children, and famine-goaded men, to whom Faustina and Drake have dedicated their lives! But they would not have listened to her if she had. Edward would have—nay, but what could Edward say or do more wounding than what, without any provocation on her part, he had already done? And Clare would have looked alarmed, and given the conversation a swift, if gentle, ply in some happier direction.

Her bus does not take her quite to her own Mansions; she has to walk a few hundred yards along that mean and noisy street whose proximity helps to bring the rents of More Mansions within indigent means. She has got half-way through it, when she sees one of the two persons whom she has been so favourably comparing with her own kinsfolk coming to meet her.

Drake and she have been several times in each other's company since their first informal introduction over the drunken cook's body, though not often *tête-à-tête*. Whenever this has happened, there has always been on Althea's mind, and perhaps also a little in her manner, the print of that impression which the knowledge of his great renunciation had graved there on her first hearing it.

He is frowning over some disagreeable thought when

she first catches sight of him, but they meet with two smiles.

"Have you been to see Miss Bateson?"

"Yes."

"Did you find her? Oh, but of course you did. She had to stay at home to see a person on business."

"I was that person."

"Were you?"

There is a slight inflexion of surprise in her voice at Faustina's not having mentioned this fact; but she does not dwell upon it.

"You look tired."

"I have been to see my family."

"Is that an epigram?"

She laughs a little dismally.

"No; but they live a long way off, and my bus was a very jolting one. I felt as if I were out hunting."

"May I walk with you to your door?"

It is so deeply unlikely that Edward will return to Oxford via Flood Street, Chelsea, that she answers, without any perceptible delay: "Yes, do."

He walks along beside her quite silently—so silently that she wonders why he had volunteered his company. At last, when the great pile of red brick that is to part them looms near, he speaks.

"Do you care to hear what my business with Miss Bateson was?"

"If you care to tell it me!"—surprised.

He still hesitates.

"I hope, at all events, that it was satisfactory."

"It would be impossible to imagine anything less so."

He pauses before adding to this vague yet emphatic statement of failure, an apparently irrelevant question.

"Are you fond of asking favours? I am not. Well, I have just asked one, and been refused."

"A favour?" It is the word that has been ringing in Althea's head since her brother's insulting employment of it, and her forehead involuntarily contracts. "Was it Faustina whom you asked?"

"Yes."

"I am sure that if it had been anything possible she would have granted it."

"Are you? Why?"

"Because she never spares herself, and because I know what a—what a high value she has for you."

"Has she? Oh, we puff each other off when it suits us."

She looks indignantly at him, but apparently he is too much absorbed to notice it.

"You know her extraordinary faculty for getting up

enough of a subject that she knows nothing of to write a rousing article upon it?"

"I know the clearness and strength of her mind, and her power of picking out essentials from accessories."

"Well"—a little impatiently—"let us call it that; then, *a fortiori* you would think that it would be easy to her to knock off a few pages upon a subject that she really does know something about?"

"Yes?"

"I have had it very much at heart that she should write me an article upon 'Dangerous Trades,' and get it into the *Universal*."

"And she refused?"

"Point-blank."

"She knew that the editor would not take it."

"On the contrary, I happen to know that his sympathies are warmly with us."

A wave of colour rolls over Althea's face.

"There must be some mistake. You know yourself that there is no subject that she feels so strongly about, nothing that she works so hard at, as factory legislation."

"There is no mistake." They have reached the separating-point. "I have lately learned some peculiarly grisly facts about an industry in which chromate of potash is employed, and which I am very anxious to bring before the public."

"Yes?"

"The other day a friend who saw the workmen engaged in this trade told me that the dust eats through the gristle of the nostrils, and destroys the palate or roof of the mouth."

She gives a little ejaculation of horror.

"He said he had seen a pencil passed through the nostril of a man who had been employed in the trade for some years, and that it was a certain result of a given period of work."

He cannot complain that his tale is not interesting her. She has come quite close to him; her cheeks are blanched, and her eyes are plunged into his. Deep and genuine as his own concern in the topic is, he cannot help the passing thought of how easily their attitude might be misread by a passer-by.

"You did not tell Faustina *that*?"

"Yes, I did."

"And she still refused?"

"As I tell you, point-blank."

"There must be some mistake. You could not have made her understand."

"She understood perfectly."

For a moment there is silence; then: "You *must* be doing her an injustice," the girl says in a voice unsteady with emotion; "such a refusal would run counter to the whole tenor of her life. Will you—will you wait

down here for a few moments while I go to her and have it cleared up?"

He shakes his head. "It would be useless."

But she has turned from him, and is speeding up the narrow stone stairs.

"How out of breath you are, my own!" says Miss Bateson, slewing herself round from her writing-table, and dropping her pen to extend her arms. But Althea neglects their invitation.

"Faustina, I have just met Mr. Drake."

The ecstatic smile upon Miss Bateson's lips dies away.

"That fact was scarcely enough to put anyone out of breath."

"He has been telling me what his business with you was."

"Has he?"

"Of the request he made you."

"Indeed!"

"And which you refused?"

"I did."

The calmness of this assent to what she had so passionately disbelieved knocks Althea on her beam-ends; and this, combined with her as yet not recovered breath, silences her, though not for long.

"But did he tell you—did you take in the facts, the monstrous facts, that he has learnt about——"

"Chromate of potash?" interrupts Faustina, with a rather bored air. "Oh yes. After all, what is it but one more pebble upon the gigantic cairn that is being built up against the day of retribution?"

"But why did you refuse?—you, who are always foremost in the fight?"

Miss Bateson's temper is good, and well in hand, but she is not very fond of being cross-questioned.

"I did it for what I considered sufficient reasons."

"And which you have not confidence enough in me to tell me!" cries the other in a deeply wounded voice. But here Faustina is equal to the occasion.

"If there is any question of want of confidence between us, it is hardly on my side."

She turns back to her writing-table, as if to close the subject; but Althea is not so to be put off.

"I *had* confidence in you; I told him I knew it was not true—that there was some mistake—that it was so unlike you. I asked him to wait until I ran up to you to have it cleared up."

Faustina lifts an eye, in which gratification is not the leading expression, to the acolyte thus turned judge, and surveys her standing quivering in red-hot excitement over her.

"It is inexpressibly painful to me to find that you have been discussing me with one who is, or ought to be, an almost entire stranger to you."

“*Ought to be!* What do you mean, Faustina?”

The tone, no less than the crimsoned face, of her metamorphosed disciple tell Miss Bateson that she has gone too far.

“I had thought,” she says, with a hint of apology, and also of a break in her voice, “that there was such perfect union of heart and mind between us, that we did not need an intruding third to explain us to one another.”

Althea’s answer is given in company with a move towards the door.

“There can be no union of heart and mind where one is shut out from the other’s confidence.”

But Faustina is at the door before her.

“My darling, if you leave me in this spirit I shall go wild with grief. What do you ask of me? I am most willing to lay bare my heart to you, as I have so often done before—to tell you the reasons why I refused John Drake’s request, or, rather, command—for he was unpleasantly peremptory—to do an article for him on ‘Dangerous Trades’ for the *Universal*.”

“The editor would not take it?” puts in Althea eagerly.

“Oh yes, he would; but—but there are other papers beside the *Universal*—other editors to be considered beside Macbride.”

“I do not understand.”

Miss Bateson does not seem in any particular hurry to explain. She clears her throat and makes one or two false starts. She gets under way at last.

"It is only now and then that I get an article to do for the *Universal*, whereas I am on the staff of the *Cheapside*; in fact, I draw a considerable part of my tiny income from it."

Althea looks mystified.

"But there is no question in this case of the *Cheapside*."

Faustina sighs heavily.

"Life is so complicated, and it is so difficult to explain its entanglements, even to one's nearest and dearest. You know that I depend entirely—almost entirely—on my own exertions for support; that I neither ask nor receive any help from my family."

"I know"—with an access of warmth—"it is exceedingly noble of you."

Even with the prop of this plaudit Miss Bateson again hesitates.

"Such being the case, to quarrel with the editor is to quarrel with my bread-and-butter—in plain words, to give up my chief means of subsistence."

"But why should you quarrel with him?"

Faustina's eye wanders distressedly towards the window, whence a squeeze pinch of the Thames is to be caught sight of, then back again, and she takes the plunge.

"Because—because—nobody can deplore it more deeply than I—he holds shares in a company concerned in that particular trade; and if I expose its iniquities, it will naturally be prejudicial to his interests, and he will be certain to turn me adrift."

There is a dead silence. Althea's face has paled and stiffened, and it is apparently with great difficulty that she gets out the words:

"Thank you for your explanation."

"You think it a satisfactory one?" cries Miss Bateson, seizing the other's perfectly irresponsive hand. "You see that my reason for refusing was sound and valid?"

"I see," replies the other dryly, "that there is a wide ditch between admiring a great sacrifice such as Mr. Drake's and emulating it."

Faustina's cheek puts on a dull flush, which shows even through her habitual high colour, and she bites her lip; but she is still able to keep herself in hand.

"It is a little hard to have John Drake set up as a model before me—*me*, who first set him on the path of renunciation."

"It was you yourself who supplied me with material for the comparison."

"There is no *real* comparison between us," returns Faustina, drawing herself up. "He is a blundering amateur, with no comprehensive grasp of the subject, only a hot-headed zeal for one or two details of it, while

I—oh! is it possible that you, of all people, should need to be told that I have devoted all my womanhood, every heart-beat, every pulse-throb, to fighting the Hydra?”

Her tone is so lofty, and Althea feels herself being put so completely in the wrong, that she has to use a strong effort in order to recall the original facts of the case before she can say in a steady, low voice:

“That was why it seemed to me so incredible.”

“One must live,” cries the other, bringing her hands together with a melodramatic gesture. “Cotton-wool people like you and Drake are incapable of putting yourselves in the position of us toilers and moilers for our daily bread. If I take pay from a man engaged in the iniquitous traffic that my whole life is spent in making war upon, I use it as a lever against him; do not you see that I hoist him with his own petard?”

Althea shakes her head.

“No; I do not.”

“Do not you see that I *must* keep body and soul together? Oh!”—with an abrupt ascent or descent from her self-justifying tone to one of lovelorn upbraiding—“has it come to this? After all these happy heart-to-heart weeks, am I to stand arraigned like a criminal at the bar before you?”

Althea’s mouth is all one painful quiver, a wave of horrid disillusionment pouring over her.

“You cannot think it more dreadful than I do, a

more shocking reversal of the right order of things! Of course you must live, and no one can admire and reverence your honourable poverty more than I do; but—but would not it be possible for you—I dare say I speak like an ignoramus—to get on the staff of some other paper with less—less objectionable principles? You must be in great request. Only to-day Mr. Drake was saying what a wonderful faculty you had for getting up subjects at short notice, and writing brilliantly upon them."

Faustina's lip assumes that ferocious curl so frequent in the pages of novels, so rare in real life, but on this occasion really on view.

"It is very good of him to allow me even that trifling merit!"

Dear Faustina.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE hatchet is buried, though to a very nice observer a bit of its handle may still be seen protruding from the ground. But to the ordinary eye there would seem to be no alteration in the relation of the friends as they go together, on the following day, to an "advanced" tea-party.

They have been wise enough to avoid a reconciliation—a thing which always leaves so much larger a cicatrice than the smartest quarrel.

Althea has had a sleepless night; but by morning the deity which had seemed to be sprawling as hopelessly as Dagon has been respectfully lifted to its pedestal again. That pedestal is not quite so high a one as before; but if the idol's feet have been shown to be clay, its head is not less undoubtedly pure gold.

If there have been stains revealed upon Faustina's falchion, she is none the less a valiant fighter in the host of righteousness and pity. Such stout combatants have in all ages of the world not been over-nice as to the quality of the weapons that came to their hands. If these ingenious reasonings have not quite cured the

gashed wound of over-night, they have at least changed its pain from an intolerably sharp to a quite supportably dull one.

The tea-party—a weekly one—is held at a club lately started with the object of aiding needy young women writers of reforming views; and if to this latter class have been added as members a few fine ladies, who find its incendiary principles and risky discussions titillating, the original element still predominates.

It is Miss Vane's first visit, and, as they have arrived rather late, the room is crowded, and the din of "advanced" tongues stunning. Faustina is at once absorbed into a vortex of female intimates, after presenting her friend to the president and secretary of the institution, who in turn introduce her with bated breath to various celebrities of whom she has never heard—gods of a little esoteric clique, whose godhood seldom reaches the large inferior outer world.

She is ushered with peculiar pomp into the acquaintance of one whose name she is vaguely conscious of having seen in publishers' advertising columns. In a happy flash it dawns upon her that it was in connection with a volume of one of the now frequent "Series."

They talk happily for a few moments, when an allusion to her "work" on the part of the lioness emboldens Althea to hazard the remark that she believes the lady has not essayed fiction.

"I have written one novel."

"Oh, indeed! I—I did not know. I have not been fortunate enough to meet with it."

"And yet it went through three editions!"—not quite suavely.

"I—I have not time to read many novels; and"—determined to keep to sure ground—"I always think of you as a biographer."

"A *biographer*?"—with raised eyebrows.

"Yes"—with rising misgivings, and a sincere desire to be "over the border and awa'." "Did not you write the 'Life of Anna Maria Schumann' in the 'Gifted Women's Series?'"

"Yes, I wrote that."

"And"—encouraged by this ray of success—"and the 'Sappho?'"

"No, certainly not!"—rather shortly. "Mme.—wrote that."

A baffled pause.

"How nice-looking that tall young lady is!"—indicating one in the near distance, and with a sudden plunge into what seems a safe subject. But it, too, has its pitfalls.

"Yes; you know, of course, who she is?"

"I am sorry to say that I do not."

"She is Mrs. Algernon Smithers."

"Oh!"—rather blankly.

"You probably only know her by her pseudonym 'Hellas?'" As the listener's face remains distressfully unenlightened: "You have, of course, in common with the whole of the cultured world, enjoyed her 'Ode to Priapus?' It is more Greek than anything since Theocritus."

"I am afraid"—now sore ashamed—"that I am very ignorant of the new poets."

"*New!* 'Hellas' has been writing for ten years. She and I began simultaneously."

The mischief is out! The lady is a *poet*. This is only one of many blunders and disasters. They multiply so much upon Miss Vane's head that she looks round at last with a despairing impulse of flight. But the wedging is too close for anything but a very slow progress towards the door, and Faustina too unattainably distant and surrounded for any looks of distress to reach her.

Althea's eyes rove helplessly over the unknown crowd—both over those ladies whose gallant feathers and careful red heads show them to be mere butterfly spectators of the fray, and those others whose wildly cropped grizzled hair and super-manly coats and waistcoats point them out as the nucleus and core—the female "Old Guard," as it were—of the army of advance.

It is with a feeling of strong surprise that she pre-

sently recognises among—or, rather, soaring above—the surge of heads the face of the girl whom she had yesterday met at luncheon at Clare's, and against poisoning whose mind with her own megrims Edward had so cruelly warned her.

What on earth can she be doing in this galley? And what would Edward's feelings be if he could see her here?

She has scarcely time for the thought, before Miss Delafield, having worked her way to her with that ease which having your head and shoulders above the human mass which is impeding your lower half gives, stands beside her, holding out an obviously delighted hand.

"Oh, Miss Vane, I am *so* glad to meet you here! I hoped that I perhaps might. I forgot to ask you for your address yesterday, and I could not persuade Mr. Vane to give it me; he turned the subject off every time I mentioned it."

"Did he?"

"But I felt I must see you again, to tell you—please do not think me impertinent—how ardently I admire—and *envy* you."

"It is very good of you to say so; but for what?"

"Oh, surely you must know for what! For doing such a grand thing. Throwing over everything—running against everybody to—to—"

The action described sounds so very much more

like that of an animal not generally admired—a bull in a china-shop—than anything else, that Althea cannot forbear a vexed smile.

“I hope I have not quite done that.”

“Oh, but I admire you so much for it! I know that I express myself badly; but I think it such a splendid thing to let no obstacle stop you in your path to what you think right. The moment that one begins to try to do right—the highest right, I mean—how many, many obstacles one finds!”

She says it with a pensive note as of personal experience, and Althea knows that she is alluding to the good-natured nobleman and noblewoman who have had the honour of endowing the world with so many feet of beauty and aspiration. She looks up with silent misgiving at the pretty face in the seven-guinea hat above her—so pretty, so much in earnest, and so far from wise.

“My mother does not know that I am here to-day. I persuaded Lady Treadwin to bring me; she has just become a member. But do not let us waste time talking of me; I want you to tell me about yourself. You live, do not you, with a friend, a high-minded friend, who has thrown over everything, too? Is she here? Would you mind presenting me to her?”

Again a thought of Edward, a thought even more rueful than amused, darts across his sister's mind. Is

this the young lady of whom he confidently predicated that she would not be likely to have much in common with *her*, Althea? But blood is thicker than water—possibly at this time yesterday it would not have been; she will not be the channel of introduction.

“I am afraid it would not be possible to get hold of her just now.”

“No, oh no! I see that it would not; and I hope I shall have many other opportunities; and, after all, it is you who are—whom I—I thought that perhaps you would allow me to call upon you. One ought not to be content with admiring people like you; one ought to try to imitate them. But it is difficult—so difficult to break away! I thought you would perhaps tell me how you did it—how you began?”

Instead of complying, Miss Vane looks back and up at her interlocutor with an expression that might be described without much exaggeration as *aghast*.

“I do not think that our cases are alike enough to make it of much use for me to do that. My father’s death—the breaking up of my home——”

“Ah yes; that, of course, simplified matters for you.”

She says it in a tone of pensive envy, and once again that sense of aghastness rolls over the elder girl. The devotion of Lord and Lady Lanington to their beautiful ewe lamb is proverbial; and that she should

be now calmly alluding to them merely as disagreeable obstacles in her path to truth and glory makes Althea feel as if she herself had set rolling a boulder down a precipice on their innocent heads, as they sit hand in hand—they have always been a model pair—at the hill-foot.

It is possible that her features express something of her consternation, for the voice of her votary sounds less assured in the next speech.

“But you had difficulties to contend with? Please do not think me impertinent, but I was told that you had had a great deal to go through.”

Miss Vane is spared the embarrassment of having to answer this question by the fact that at this point the secretary of the club brings up another lady to present to her, a lady too young, as she with a relieved feeling sees, to have as yet achieved any great renown, and about whom, therefore, she need not fear to repeat her distressing blunder of half an hour ago. She does not catch this new acquaintance's name, and thinks it safest to tell her so.

“Oh, my name would not convey anything to you. I do a great deal of anonymous work journalising. There is a great field for women in journalism; it is where general information tells.”

Althea is turning over in her mind whether this statement does not contain an unintended implication

that accuracy is not the forte of the now confessedly superior sex, when the young lady adds:

“My mother’s name will be no doubt familiar to you, though mine is not—Beachy Head.”

An overpowering sense of crass ignorance whelms Althea, and must be conveyed by her face, for, as in the case of the poetess, the other’s look of confident expectation pales.

“She writes under that sobriquet. She thought that it conveyed her position in the world of speculative thought.”

Althea looks wildly round, and her eye alights on Miss Delafield, still hovering anxiously near. But to take refuge with her would be to fall out of the frying-pan into the fire. It is with genuine relief that she sees Faustina masterfully ploughing a path towards her through the female sea. She nods familiarly to the young journalist, but her words are for Althea.

“I am afraid I must take you away; it is later than I thought.” In a lower tone: “You look fagged, darling. Is it so?”

Though the tone is low, the speech is overheard by Miss Delafield, and its tenderness reveals the speaker. A glance of quickened excitement passes over her face, and she draws a step nearer. Faustina looks back at her, and then both half turn towards Althea, plainly asking an introduction. But the thought of Ned is

strong in his sister's mind, and she makes as though she sees not.

"Let us come. I am quite, quite ready."

Her disappointed votary does not get even a parting hand-shake from her. As they stand at the street-corner, waiting to pick out their red Hammersmith bus from the endless multicoloured file, Faustina asks:

"Who was your pretty May-pole?"

"Miss Delafield."

"A bit of the old life, I suppose?"

"Yes."

"But perhaps with aspirations after something better?"

"If she has, they are not of a kind that can ever be of the smallest use."

"H'm!"

"She is not in the least of our sort."

"Our! How sweet of you, love, to bracket us together! But, as I have often told you, it is all grist that comes to my mill. And she looks to belong to the very class—the aristocratic 'iced slugs'—that I want to get hold of. I wish I had asked you to introduce me to her."

"Do you?"

"But I dare say I shall have other opportunities."

"I dare say."

They reach home in silence, and Althea turns into

her meagre bedroom. There is a sense of fatigue, of arrested enthusiasm, upon her, and it is in a not very brisk voice that she answers Faustina's knock and request to enter, made not five minutes after they have parted. She comes in with sparkling eyes and a paper in her hand. Althea's eyes fall on the name of the journal.

"Since when have you become a reader of the *Morning Post*?"

"Since when indeed? But I had a special reason for buying it. Your aunt Lavinia gives one of her big political parties on Wednesday."

"Yes?"

The word sounds indifferent, but Miss Vane's heart in uttering it seems to have slipped under the soles of her feet. Faustina has sat down on the bed beside her friend—in the flat there is no vulgar superfluity of chairs—and taken her hand with an air of almost solemnity.

"My heart's dear one, you wounded me last night by an implication—perhaps a just one—that I am not single-minded in my devotion to the cause of suffering humanity; that I allow motives of personal interest to sway my conduct. Nay, do not be afraid"—as Althea makes a deprecating gesture; "I have no wish to reopen the subject, except to tell you that you have now an

opportunity of proving—what I never doubted—of how much purer metal *you* are made.”

“*How?*” —very faintly.

“If you remember, on the first night of your being here, you asked me how you could make yourself of most use, and I told you socially. Do you recollect?”

“I recollect your saying so.”

“I said it because it was, and is, my firm conviction. That, then, is where you could *really* help.”

Althea moves restlessly.

“Have I been of no help, then, all these weeks?”

“Of course you have. Your sweet presence has been an untold support; but as to the actual work you have done, hundreds of women with not a tithe of your gifts, but with the wholesome habit of labour, could have done it better; whereas in the direction and for the end I point out to you, you would be unique.”

There is a most uncomfortable silence, and when at length it is broken, it is not by Althea.

“If you feel that the test is a severer one than you can bear, I will, of course, not urge you; only, dearest, if it is so, I would ask you in future to be a little more lenient to other fallible mortals.”

Neither the perfectly good-humoured tone in which this last clause is spoken, nor the caress by which it is accompanied, takes, nor is, perhaps, intended to take, the sting out of it, and Miss Vane writhes.

"You are right; I have no business to preach to others, and yet flinch when my own turn comes. No doubt it is not because there seems to me something as unworthy and underhand in picking people's confidence as their purse, but because it would be so intensely disagreeable to myself, that I shrink. What is it you want me to do?"

"My noble darling, I knew that you only needed to have it brought home to you."

"What do you want me to do?"

Faustina has the sense to see that her friend would rather that she dropped her hand, and she does so, while the businesslike glitter comes into her black eyes.

"You have heard me speak of the Child Insurance Bill?"

"Yes."

"You know how keen I am to get up the facts about it?"

"Yes."

"And how hard I have found it to do so?"

"Yes."

"How impossible to approach the Home Secretary?"

"Yes."

"Well, through you, I have now an opportunity of getting at him. The Ministers are sure to be at your aunt's party, and he among them."

"So will two hundred other people be."

"I think you once told me that he was an old friend of yours?"

"Of my father's. My acquaintance with him is very slight."

"But enough to justify your addressing him, I suppose?"

"I suppose so."

A pause. Althea feels the net closing round her, but she makes one more despairing effort to break through its meshes.

"My aunt is not in the least likely to send me a card."

"And you could not get one through Clare—Mrs. Boteler, as I suppose I ought to call her?"

"If she suspected my motive for asking it, certainly not."

"Why need she suspect it? Why need anyone suspect it?"

Althea starts up and goes to the window, inhaling as much air as the blank wall, three feet off, opposite, and the projection of their own kitchen, thrusting itself forward at right angles, to still further cut off any troublesome zephyrs, allow her to do. It is this very underhandedness, what seems to her the social treachery of her intended *rôle*, which makes it so hard a mouthful to swallow.

Faustina wisely leaves her for a few moments to

battle alone with herself, and when she speaks there is neither reproach nor further urgency in tone or words, only affection, touched with pity.

"If the sacrifice is a greater one than you can manage, let us say no more about it. I dare say I had no right to ask it, and perhaps in time I may gain my object by some other road. It is on these sort of occasions that I feel the hardness of the doors that are shut in my face. That must be my excuse for teasing you; and also that my love and admiration throned you so high that I thought no test—not even"—with an indulgent smile—"the fiery trial of asking a few innocent questions of an old acquaintance—could be too strong for you."

Althea's head is still out of the window, and for a few minutes it seems doubtful to her companion whether she has heard. But that doubt is removed by the girl's next movement, which is to leave her post and put a hand on each shoulder of Miss Bateson, as she still sits in patient, cool expectation on the bed. Althea's eyes are shining, though her cheeks are pale.

"You are right. I talk tall, and think myself entitled to reproach you, who are so far, far ahead of me in every respect; but when anything painful to myself is required of me, I cry off. Thank you for showing me what I really am. I will go."

CHAPTER IX.

THERE is not the least difficulty as to the card for Aunt Lavinia's party; and the delight with which Clare writes to propose Althea's dining with the Boteler *ménage*, and going with them to it, shows the latter in how false a position Miss Bateson has placed her. Her family clearly believe, and joy in the belief, that she is beginning to look back from her plough, when, in point of fact, her one object in this sudden return to the world is to drive her share still deeper through the furrow.

It is impossible for her to explain this to them, and she feels a sense of sailing under false colours when they all softly make much of her. They do it very delicately; and there is no allusion to the past or to former discrepancies, except one abortive jocosity strangled by his wife in its cradle on the part of the host, whose strong point is not his tact. But the air seems to have been warmed to receive her. Edward, who is, somehow, up again from Oxford, looks a little confused on first meeting, and she had meant to be very stiff with him; but his intention is so evidently con-

ciliatory that she finds after the first minute or two confusion and stiffness both merging in the general pleasantness. The dinner is very merry, and Althea would have enjoyed it thoroughly but for the weight of her own duplicity and the incubus of the coming task imposed upon her.

They have dined very late, and the intervening space before it is time to set off flies but too quickly. The three sisters and the brother talk all at once about their childhood, reminding each other of long-forgotten jests and catastrophes; and William Boteler, who has naturally no share in the topic, sits by listening with a beatified smile, and his arm—an attitude which seems chronic—round Fanny's waist. Althea wonders how he would have disposed of that twining limb had *she* been the resident sister-in-law.

But now enjoyment is over, and labour and sorrow begun. There is plenty of time for disagreeable anticipation, as it is long before Aunt Lavinia's door is reached, so interminable is the string—early as it is in the season, there is evidently going to be a real crush; it is longer still before all the steps of her wide stairs are climbed, her flower-banked landing attained, and her hand briefly shaken.

Short as the hostess's greeting necessarily is, there seems to be in the touch of her fingers such an emphasised warmth for Althea that the latter has time

for a fresh tweak of that odious sense of dishonesty and false pretences on her own part. As she follows slowly in Clare's wake through the rapidly-filling rooms, she is greeted by many old acquaintances. All are civil and glad to see her, though most of them in the hurry of their own lives have never missed her; and thanks to that, and the conditions of throng and haste in which they meet, there is no need and no demand for explanation.

So thick does the crowd become, that Althea is beginning to give herself the cowardly comfort, inwardly blushed for, yet none the less felt, that she will be able to tell Faustina conscientiously that she has failed in her mission through never having even caught sight of the object of her quest, when, by the action of some wave in the starred and jewelled sea, she suddenly finds herself shoulder to shoulder with him. His eye falls accidentally upon her, but in it there is obviously no recognition. Her heart sinks even lower than before; but she knows that if she does not take her courage in both hands and "rush" it, the opportunity will be lost, probably not to return.

"I am afraid that you do not recollect me."

The great man looks at her once again, but, alas! with no glance of knowledge, though he is far too courteous to allow it.

"Not recollect you! How could that be possible?"

You are"—it is evident that she will not let him off—"you are"—then, as he still gazes in benevolent concern, not unmixed with admiration, at the very pretty and strangely-agitated face lifted towards him, the lacking memory, to his intense relief, flashes back upon him—"you are one of my dear old friend Vane's girls. I have not seen you since—ah, that was a loss! Let us try and find a quiet corner where you can tell me all about yourselves."

* * * * *

Half an hour later a young man, who has been working his way through the brilliant press, giving and receiving greetings, but such occasional ones as show him to be not an *habitué* of the London world, comes upon Althea. She is not speaking to anyone when he first catches sight of her, and he remarks with surprise the extreme discomposure of her countenance. Apparently his face expresses some of his astonishment, for on recognising him she evidently makes an effort to pull herself together, and says, with an air of affected lightness and surprise as real as his own:

"Are the skies going to fall? *You* at an evening party?"

"And *you*?"

At once the clouds rush back and darken all her features.

"I had a motive. I came here for a special object."

"Which I hope you have attained?"

"Oh, do not ask me," she says in a low voice of anguish, and with an arrested gesture, as of one who would cover her face with her hands, and only remembers just in time how far too public is the place for such a relief. "I—I"—her voice sinking to a whisper almost inaudible in the universal buzz—"I have experienced one of the most bitter mortifications of my life. I cannot tell you about it here."

He has a moment of gratification, whose sharpness surprises himself, at the implication that under more favourable circumstances she would tell him of her disaster, before he says:

"You look as if you wanted more air and space to recover in; you know the house—is there no room where you would be able to find them?"

"There is Aunt Lavinia's boudoir; it is not generally thrown open."

"Let me take you there."

She assents in a small and rather guilty voice. According to the code of manners of the world to which she has made this brief and disastrous return, she is doing rather an odd thing; but, after all, what are its laws to her?—and, besides, she does feel rather faint. The boudoir, though lit and flower-banked like the more

public rooms, is empty; and after a few moments of silent repose—silent, for Drake does not disturb her—Althea recovers.

“I am all right again. I had better go back to Clare—to my sister, Mrs. Boteler.”

“Then, you are not going to tell me?”

His tone, though respectfully acquiescent, is yet obviously disappointed, and she hesitates. For some perverse reason he is the one person to whom it would be a relief to her to reveal her discomfiture.

“I do not know why I should not,” she says doubtfully; “perhaps you might hit upon something to say that would restore my self-respect.”

“*Your self-respect?*”

“Yes; it lies in the dust.”

He is standing beside her as she leans back in Aunt Lavinia’s own special chair. The shaded electric light falls on her pretty shoulders and on her faintly-indicated collar-bones. The thought that they ought not to be visible at all passes across Drake’s mind, harnessed to the rather angry wonder whether Faustina gives her enough to eat.

“Possibly you are exaggerating. I would not for worlds urge you, but if I knew what had happened, I might perhaps put *it*, whatever it may be, in a less humiliating light.”

She shakes her head slowly.

"There is no other light possible, as you will see when I tell you."

She draws herself slowly up, and he is glad. When she sits up the collar-bones disappear, and he feels fonder of Miss Bateson.

"You know—or do you know?—how very much interested in the Child Insurance Bill Faustina is?"

"Yes."

"How much she has regretted her inability to get at the facts she wanted about it?"

"Yes."

"Well, to-night she thought she had found her opportunity."

"Yes?"

"She has always had an idea that I could help her socially, if I would."

"I know she has."

"She mentioned it once before, and I combated it strongly."

"Did you?"

"But this time she was so urgent—and I could not help suspecting that my refusing was because it was so personally distasteful to me—that I ended by consenting. You know what the service she asked of me was?"

"I do not know precisely; of course I can guess its general drift."

"I had mentioned to her that the present Home Secretary was an old friend of my father's; and what she asked of me was that I should go to this party, renew acquaintance with him, and, without his suspecting it, pick his brains!"

She pronounces this last phrase with an accent of almost as much horror as if it had been a question of a literal attack with a "jemmy" upon the skull of the dignitary in question.

"Well?"

She hears—and it gives her a ray of comfort—that her listener is drawing his breath sympathetically short.

"I thought at first that I should not have the chance of getting near him in the crowd—oh, if I had not!—but by accident I happened to find myself close to him. He did not know me at first, but when he remembered me he was so kind, so courteous! took me away into a recess to ask all sorts of interested questions about us—real interest, not pretended. He talked with such genuine affection and regret of my father; paid him such a noble tribute——"

Her agitation is gaining on her, and she stops; nor does Drake offer any remark. She feels the tact of his silence, and is able after a little while to go on.

"When we had been talking for ten minutes, I remembered—I had quite forgotten it—the object with

which I had forced myself upon him, and tried to turn the conversation from my private affairs to public ones. I am sure I did it very clumsily—I was so agitated, I scarcely knew what I said——”

Another break. The increased strain of suffering effort shows that she is nearing the catastrophe.

“Faustina had coached me as to the way I was to approach the subject—the sort of indirect inquiries I was to make; but I bungled terribly, and the feeling that I was bungling made me bungle more; and then—I saw his face begin to stiffen and harden. At first he had only looked puzzled, not knowing what I would be at; but he listened politely, and when I stopped—not because I had said in the least what I wanted, but simply because I *could* not go on—he took my hand—not nearly so kindly as he had done before—and said: ‘My dear young lady, may I tell you a story?’ I was too choked to answer; and he went on: ‘Some years ago, during the Premiership of Lord Beaconsfield, and during an acute political crisis, a certain great lady sat one night at dinner beside the Prime Minister. She thought it a good opportunity for getting a few State secrets out of him, and pumped him, as she thought, very artfully for some time. He listened attentively and in perfect silence till she finished, and then he turned to her and—though she was not a very wise woman,

she was an exceedingly pretty one--said very affectionately: "You darling!" "

At the close of this terrible anecdote Althea's fortitude gives way, and she yields to the impulse which she had with difficulty resisted in the more public rooms, and hides her burning face in her gloved hands. As, however, it is quite possible that she may have a glint of sight left between her fingers, Drake controls the smile which is tickling the corners of his mouth, and which, if indulged in, would certainly do to death a friendship so promisingly budding.

Again his silence seems to soothe her, for in a minute or so her distressed face re-emerges.

"I was struck dumb with mortification, and he just bowed and left me. Of course, what I ought to feel is the having so signally failed Faustina, but just at present I can think of nothing but the personal humiliation."

"She had no business to put such a task upon you--no right to credit you with a hide like her own!" he answers indignantly.

The phrase horrifies her less than it would have done three days ago, but the shocked surprise it engenders is still strong enough to make her for the moment forget her own woes.

He goes on:

"If she does not take care she will overreach her-

self, and make you chuck—give up the whole thing—disgust you, I mean, with the whole Cause.”

“No, that she will never do!”

Her eyes, veiled with a slight mist that might distil in tears, clear and sparkle; and he looks at her with an admiration that, since it may be construed into a tribute to her apostleship, and not her womanhood, he does not take much pains to hide.

“By-the-by,” he adds, changing the subject, partly with the good-natured motive of distracting her thoughts, “will you let me ask you which of us, you or I, proved to be right as to the subject which we discussed when I met you in Flood Street?”

Again her face falls.

“The chromate of potash article?”

“Yes.”

“*You* were.”

She divines a something of triumph in his silence, and adds:

“But she gave me reasons—what seemed to her sufficient reasons—for her refusal.”

“Did they seem to you sufficient?”

Her look meets his with a sort of defiance. She will not be trapped into a disloyalty to her leader.

“I do not think that a wretched bungling amateur has any right to criticise the action of an expert.”

He likes her none the less for her fidelity; but he

feels that their acquaintance, much as it has stridden forward within the last half-hour, is scarcely ripe enough to tell her so.

"Have you found any other writer to do for you what she—did not see her way to doing?"

"Not yet."

"I wish I could help you, but it seems"—despondently—"that I am equally futile with tongue and pen; and yet, Heaven knows—oh, how those facts you told me the other day haunted me! And I suppose they are only a few out of hundreds equally heart-rending?"

"Only a very few."

"Tell me more about the chromate of potash. What is it? What is it used for?"

"It scarcely seems congruous talk here and to-night."

"Bah!" she says, casting an almost revolutionary eye round upon her aunt's *bibelots* and hangings. "It is a good thing that these walls should hear a few ugly truths for once."

"It is used for dyeing, and in great calico-printing works."

"And why is it so deadly?"

"Unfortunately, it has to be made fast with sugar of lead."

"Sugar of lead?"

"Yes; the disease—but, indeed, I tell you under protest; I think you have had quite enough disagreeables for one night."

"I may as well fill up my cup while I am about it. The disease?"

"It comes from the dust entering the men's nostrils, and giving them a nipping, tickling sensation, which makes them rub their noses with fingers already covered with the powder. You may imagine the result."

"And is there no remedy?"

Her tone is one of the deepest interest; she has forgotten the insult which Dizzy has been made the vehicle of conveying to her; from the tension, and in the excitement of the moment, she has stood up, to be more nearly on a level with her companion. It is as fellow-champions, brother fighters in the battle of mercy, that they involuntarily draw together. But to an onlooker their attitude would be misleading.

Althea's back and Drake's face are turned towards the door; and, since he does not answer her eager question, she is about to repeat it, when she learns the reason of his silence. They are no longer alone.

"Clare is looking for you everywhere."

"Is she?"

"Oh, Miss Vane, how glad I am! Is Miss Bateson here?"

"No, she is not."

"Mr. Drake!"—turning with scarcely more veiled enthusiasm to Althea's companion. "I thought you never went to evening parties."

"Did you?"

"I have not seen you since to thank you for your wonderful speech. I cannot tell you how some of your phrases literally burnt into my brain. And what an audience! You might have heard a pin drop. And, large as the room was, your voice carried to the very end of it."

The brother and sister—for the intruders are Ned and Miss Delafield—stand silently listening, their rising anger against each other—his at her action, hers at his tone—sunk in surprise at the apparent intimacy revealed as existing between their respective friends.

"I am glad that it interested you."

Nothing can be quieter or less fatuous than this acceptance of a compliment; but either it, or more probably the effusion that made it necessary, are as much as Edward can bear. His vexation spurts out in his next speech to his sister:

"Clare has been looking for you everywhere—everywhere in the least *likely*."

"I will go to her at once."

They all—since Miss Delafield is clearly determined not to be detained there—leave the room together, and make their way through the now thinning throng, the

young girl throwing out reminiscences of the meeting she has alluded to, and overtures, rendered a little hesitating by the passive nature of Miss Vane's acceptance of them, to Althea as they pass along.

* * * * *

"Oh, what *have* you done to Edward?"

This cry of the soul escapes from Mrs. Boteler's lips almost before the carriage-door is shut upon her and Althea. Fanny is on the back-seat; but, then, she never counts.

"I? Nothing!"

"He came to me just now in *such* a state of mind!"

"Did he? What about?"

"He said he had just come upon you sitting in Aunt Lavinia's boudoir, where you had no business to take anyone."

"As much business as he had to take Miss Delafield."

"Oh, poor fellow! he wanted to find a place where he might have a little quiet talk with her."

"And why might not I want to find a place where I could have a little quiet talk with Mr. Drake?"

Her words sound brazenly in her own ears, but they are falsified by her voice, which a jumble of feelings, all disagreeable, makes shaky.

"*Drake*—is that his name? Oh, dearest Thee, where *do* you pick up such kind of people?"

"Where? In the slums, of course, where I reside."

A laugh, more hysterical than defiant, ornaments this reply.

"Ned says that he is a man who has been kicked out of society, and turned out by his own family, for his disgraceful opinions."

"Dear, charitable Ned!"

"Of course, I took what he said with a grain of salt; he was so agitated, so—well, so indignant at your having introduced such a person to Cressida Delafield!"

"He said that *I* introduced Mr. Drake to Miss Delafield?"

"Yes; he thought her so unlikely to have met him otherwise."

"If he had not been so warped by prejudice, he might have seen that my astonishment at their being acquainted was quite as great as his."

"I told him I was sure he was wrong. But, oh, Thee! Thee! why *will* you know such people? Ned said he was talking to you with—do not be angry—such offensive intimacy. Never mind Fanny; she is asleep. Are not you, Fanny?"

"Do you know what we were talking about?" asks Althea in an ominously quiet voice. "I am sure, when I tell you, you will think I am no longer worthy of a place in your brougham. We were talking of *chromate of potash!*"

CHAPTER X.

No one can say that Faustina does not take her disappointment well. No reproach passes her lips. Not only does her robust philosophy enable her to accept the collapse of her scheme with cheerful equanimity, but she takes all the blame of its failure upon herself.

"I ought to have better known your delicacy of fibre, darling. I cannot think what could have made me show such a want of adaptation of means to ends. What I shall not forgive myself in a hurry is the suffering I have been the means of inflicting upon you."

"Thank you very, *very* much for looking at it in that way," answers Althea, with a rush of gratitude. "I might have known that you would take the largest, noblest view of my failure; but I feared lest when you found how completely I had broken down in the only kind of work for which you had thought me fitted——"

"*The only kind?*"

"You said so the other day."

"Did I? I have no recollection of it. We were both a little heated with argument, perhaps. Even if I did say so—even if it were true—what would it matter

comparatively? All that is asked of such as *you* is to *be!*”

Here they fall into each other's arms. And even when they emerge, the talk keeps at a high level of tenderness.

“I cannot forgive myself these dear, pale cheeks!”

“If you could give me your physique, as well as your indomitable spirit! It seems ridiculous that one wound to my vanity should make me look as I know I do, and feel such a wreck. But you need not reproach yourself; I had other annoyances, too.”

Faustina looks curious; but not even their renewed condition of melting fondness, nor the revived heat of Althea's admiration for her friend, prevails upon her to dish up her family for that friend's delectation.

Faustina does not press her; and although, as a rule, her own iron strength makes her sceptical as to anyone ever being “not up” to any exertion, she to-day insists on Althea abiding, like Achilles, in her tent; while she herself goes forth to war against the Troy of “Capital” on a trades-union platform.

With sincere self-contempt, Althea ends by acquiescing. On the previous night she has scarcely closed an eye, and angry Nature, wronged of her dues, avenges herself by tapping with a tiresome little hammer on her temples, and hanging weights on her legs.

“I can, at all events, do some typing,” she has said, in a faint effort to restore her self-esteem; but when

Miss Bateson has gone, she finds that even here she has promised more than she can perform.

Her eyes swim and her hands tremble. There is nothing for it but to give in. Thinking that the air may do her good, she puts on her hat, and telling the "Eliza" of the day, whom she has of late been trying to lick into a little shape, that she is going out for a stroll, she saunters along Cheyne Walk until she reaches Old Chelsea Church, and, seeing the door open, wanders aimlessly in.

She has never hitherto entered it, the rush of Faustina's life into which she has been swept leaving no leisure for the quiet amities of converse with the past, for which, indeed, and the sciences that deal with it, Miss Bateson has as sincere a contempt as it is possible to entertain.

But as Althea stands in the little fourteenth-century chancel, looking at the monument to Sir Thomas More, surmounted by his punning blackamoor's-head crest, a wave of tenderness over the departed and the bygone rolls over her—both over her own past—recent, insignificant, yet dear—and that greater past of which the gray slab before her, with its Latin inscription penned by him who was to lie beneath it, whose hallowed reliques, "when the heat of persecution somewhat subsided, were devoutly carried to the village of Chelsea," is the representative.

The past to the girl always means her father—means graceful tastes, leisurely cultivation, tender high-breeding, nice honour. With a rush of bitter discouragement she feels how far, in the short space since his death, she has travelled from them all—all but the last, *nice honour*.

Her cheeks begin to burn. Was her action, her pitiful action, of last night consistent even with that? How much she has given up! and of what profit to herself, or to the Cause for which she has sacrificed herself, has she been? Her very own familiar friend and guide has told her, with a bluntness that she cannot blame, how valueless the services that had seemed to her so laborious in the acting had been; that any trained drudge could have done them better. And yet the flame that burnt her was, and is, a true one, though in her dejection she feels that Faustina is beginning to disbelieve it. "They also serve who only stand and wait." Is it to be her portion through life to "stand and wait," while she sees other happier ones do the work and bear the palms?

"They also serve who only stand and wait."

She repeats the line aloud, thinking that it is a hard saying, with hands clasped, and eyes still perusing the memorial to him who had done so much more than "only stand and wait," when the door space, over half of which Sir Thomas More's monument oddly projects,

is still further filled by the figure of a man, whom she at once recognises to be Drake. He glances quickly round.

“Are you alone? I thought I heard you talking.”

She colours faintly.

“I was—to myself. How did you know I was here?”

There seems to him to be in her eye some expected explanation of his pursuit.

“I heard you had gone for a stroll, and, as I know there is not much room for strolling in your life generally, I feared you were feeling the effects of——”

“Of last night? Yes, I am. I have been assassinated by an anecdote.”

“I would not be that if I were you.”

“It was the one thing that Faustina thought I could do. It has been such a disappointment to her, and she has borne it so well.”

Her lip is trembling.

“It is a method I have never had any sympathy with. I have often told her so.”

There is such a robust anger in his tone that Althea looks at him with surprise.

“I never can quite understand your relations with Faustina. You appear intimate, and yet there are moments when you seem absolutely to dislike her.”

"There *are* moments when I do absolutely dislike her, and the present is one."

There is no mistaking the out-and-out partisanship bespoken by both voice and eye, and a small stir of comforted warmth makes itself felt about her heart. Her own family misunderstand and chide her; her chosen guide has weighed her in the balance and found her wanting. But this comparative stranger—oh no! no longer that—himself proved capable of the highest self-sacrifice, recognises through the wretchedness of her performance the high reality of her endeavour—recognises it as the truly noble are ever quick to recognise the dimmest spark of nobility in others.

"Of course, that is only a *façon de parler*, a way of conveying your compassion for my disaster," she answers, in a voice that is more colourless and quiet than her eye and cheek; "but I do not want kindness to-day: I want bracing."

"How is it to be done?"

"Did you ever feel the utter failure of faith in yourself that I am feeling to-day?" she asks suddenly, with a carrying of the seat of war from the stage of her heart to his, which he is so unprepared for as to have no instant reply ready. She answers herself: "But no; the resolution that could string you up to such a sacrifice as yours is not likely to know any after-faltering."

"What sacrifice? What do you mean?"

"You do not mind Faustina having told me?" she asks gently, noting the disturbance in his countenance. "I hope she thought I was worthy of the pleasure of hearing that such things are done, and that there are people to do them."

He looks thoroughly uncomfortable.

"I dare say she greatly exaggerated the—what you are alluding to."

"Why should you try to depreciate, because you have done it yourself, an action that you would be the first to exalt if it had been done by anybody else?"

She has taken a brief for him thus prettily against himself; but, seeing his confusion at being so praised, she hastens to change the subject.

"I think that nothing would help so much to-day to cure me of my sentimental woes—I dare say you look upon them as no better—than if you were to be good enough to tell me of some real sorrow—some such facts as you were relating last night when—when we were interrupted."

"Am I never to be anything but a purveyor of horrors?"

There is a slight impatience in his tone, and a little resentment in her rejoinder:

"I thought it was the subject nearest your heart."

He gives his head a sort of toss.

“Yes, I suppose it is; but cannot you understand the wish to escape for a little while from the obsession of a lifelong hobby—and such a hobby, too?”

“It is new to me, and I am not yet tired of it.”

He lets the little flier pass in good-humoured silence. They have moved from before the More monument, and are standing side by side at the old oak altar-rails—before that altar at which probably Henry VIII. stood with Jane Seymour; at which so many a man and maid, in the four centuries, or more nearly five, since the church was founded, have stood to engage in that sacred contract for which both the present man and maid, as each had been separately informed, feel and express so deep an abhorrence.

The idea darts simultaneously into both their minds, that they look as if they were being married. It gives him an annoyed sense of being always, in reference to his companion, seeming something that he is not, and it makes her move away down the aisle. He follows her in silence between the old oak pews, upon which no architect has yet laid an abolishing hand. The influence of the place is stilling, in the completeness of its belonging to the departed centuries. Among the monuments there is not one intrusion on the part of the pushing present. What common-place dead of the nineteenth century, indeed, would venture to thrust themselves into the lofty company of Sir Thomas More and Spenser's

"Alcyon," to squeeze his paltry modern tablet between the ruined beauty of the resting-place of the Northumberland family and the superb monument where, recumbent and canopied, the noble Dacre pair await the blare of the last trumpet upon their altar-tomb?

Partly for fear of crossing her mood, partly because his own spirit feels the quelling of the historic past, thus brought before his bodily eyes, Drake breaks into her thoughts by no remark until, having made the circuit of the church, they stand in final contemplation before the brasses of the Northumberland tomb, where the Duchess kneels with her five daughters behind her. A freakish vandalism of some former age has picked out the effigies of the five sons that once balanced the female members of the family.

For the first time Althea speaks in a low voice, and looking curiously at the vacant spaces: "I wonder which was Lord Guildford Dudley's—Lady Jane Grey's husband?"

He has nothing to suggest, and it makes him feel stupid.

"Do you know that she must have often come to church here?"

"I did not know it."

"And Queen Elizabeth, too, when she was Princess."

"Yes."

"The Countess of Nottingham—the one who kept back Essex's ring—is buried here."

Her face is flushing with delicate emotion. For the moment she has forgotten the Cause, Progress—all that has made up her life of late. He sees her in a new and, as it seems to him, a lovely light.

"And you expected me to tell you *here* grisly anecdotes of chromate of potash and bisulphate of carbon!"

With an unexpected spring she is back in the present.

"You never told me anything about bisulphate of carbon."

He looks at her with an expression of decision.

"And, what is more, I will not—at least, not to-day, *now, here!*"

"Perhaps you are right; it might give them bad dreams," she says, looking round at the sculptured effigies; then, with a sudden spring to another topic: "I did not know that you were acquainted with Miss Delafield."

"No more I am. I never saw her before last night, except at the meeting to which she alluded."

"Over which she was so ecstatic?"

"Her enthusiasm deserved a better theme; but I thought it pretty."

This is not the light in which it had struck Miss Vane, and she maintains a dry silence which she dimly feels to be ungenerous.

"Where was it at?"

"At Canning Town. I was only talking to our own people—our dockers." As she makes no comment, he presently adds: "You have never seen our Settlement."

"I do not think Faustina has ever been asked to speak there."

"I am sure she has not; she came to loggerheads with my chief over a County Council election."

"Then, I am afraid I never shall."

"You are not absolutely inseparable," he says, with a tinge of impatience. "Could not you come without her?"

"*By myself?*"

"If you would allow me, I should be very glad to be your escort."

Her sole answer is a slight blush; and, with an inward reflection how very far she still is from that complete emancipation from the trammels of convention which she imagines herself to have reached, he lets the subject drop. She harks back to the Delafield topic.

"Do you know Miss Delafield's parents—Lord and Lady Lanington?"

"I used to; I do not know anyone now. Last night I felt like Rip Van Winkle. I never go out in London

now. I have not the time; and, besides—nobody wants me.”

“*Nobody wants you!*”

There is a delicate flavour of incredulity about this repetition of his own words.

“In my differences with my father, society, in so far as it troubled itself about us at all, which was not much, sided with him; and, indeed, it was by no means altogether in the wrong. I was very ill-judged and intemperate. If it had to be done over again, I should do it quite differently.”

“But you WOULD do it?”

There is a fiery spark of enthusiasm in her eye, and an imperative anxiety in her voice, which make him feel that he would be compelled to give the answer she expects, even if it were not the true one.

“Yes; I should do it. And *you?*”

“*I?*”

“Yes. If it were to do over again, would you repeat your sacrifice—one so infinitely greater than mine?”

“*Greater than yours!*”

Once again she has repeated his words, this time with an unmistakable accent of mixed scorn and reverence. Which of these emotions is for herself, which for him, is to the young man delightfully clear.

“Infinitely greater,” he repeats; “mine was a mere

throwing away of superfluities, yours the abandonment of every habit and tradition and household tie, and I should imagine that household ties would be very dear to you"—with a softened inflection—"the acceptance of every possible galling paltry hardship and discomfort, from drunken cooks upward or downward."

"*Cook*, not *cooks*. There was only one, and she left next day."

He laughs a little. "She was a host in herself."

"One would indeed be a poor creature if one could be turned aside from one's life-purpose by the loss of a few little luxuries. I confess I was ashamed to find how much I missed them at first; but I very soon got used to doing without them; and you must remember that I had Faustina to set against them."

"Yes, you had Faustina."

Her face, which a moment ago had been rippled over by a little smile of inward gratification at the heroic, if somewhat erroneous, light in which he had set her career, droops again into unaffected dejection.

"It is not the want of cotton-wool, as Faustina calls it—you must not think that—which is depressing me; the sting lies in the fact that I have fallen so far short of her expectations. She is rather apt to idealise those whom she loves—do not you think so? Do you happen to remember whether she idealised Miss Lewis?"

The channel in which her thoughts are running—following the late favourite to her unhonoured extinction—is so obvious that a streak of affectionate amusement tinges the real sympathy in his heart.

“Not that I recollect. It would have been difficult.”

“Sometimes I think I might have done better if I had been with a person nearer my own level intellectually—someone who would have made mistakes too, whom I might have gone hand-in-hand with, helped as well as been helped by.”

In their talk they have again rambled round the church, and have now paused opposite the full-length reclining figure in the North Chapel of the Lady Jane, who has lent her surname to pleasant and now illustrious Cheyne Walk. Neither looks at her, for the excellent reason that they are looking at each other. Althea has raised her eyes, full of a delicate, wistful distress, to his, and he, for the first time off his guard, has dropped his plumb into them.

“Someone whom I could have gone hand-in-hand with,” she repeats.

* * * * *

Either Miss Vane must have spent more time in lionising Old Chelsea Church than she was aware of, or Miss Bateson must have demolished “Capital” with fewer strokes of her biting eloquence than she had ex-

pected, for before Althea opens the door of the little sitting-room she is made aware of her leader's return by hearing her voice in fluent interchange with another female one. It strikes her confusedly that she has heard that other voice before, yet on her entrance she does not for the first moment recognise the figure seated in an attitude of eager devotion at Faustina's knee. It is only when six feet of elegant stature and perfectly-cut clothes raise themselves with youth's quick suppleness, and hasten to meet her, that, with a shock of displeased surprise, she realises that it is Miss Delafield.

"You see that I have found out your *gîte!*" cries she, in a tone of childish triumph. "I have made Miss Bateson's acquaintance without your kind help. Oh, why were not you at the meeting? You do not know what you have lost. I could have listened for ever!"

A slight flash of ironic wonder as to whether Drake would consider this enthusiasm—so identical in quality, and equal in quantity, to what his own speech had called forth—as "pretty" as he had done when he himself had evoked it, darts athwart Althea's mind, but she remains tongue-bound.

"I do not know whether you will endorse Miss Bateson's invitation," continues the visitor, with a very faint cloud of doubt resting on her radiant brow, "but she has most kindly invited me to stay with you for a couple of nights."

“To *stay* with us!”

There is such undisguised consternation in the accent with which this is uttered that Faustina comes to the rescue.

“Miss Delafield expressed such a strong curiosity to know how we working women live, that I told her her best plan would be to come back with me and make practical trial of it. I have engaged to treat her exactly as one of ourselves.”

She says it with calm good-humour, as if suggesting the most natural and feasible project imaginable.

Althea's brain whirls round like a peg-top.

“I do not understand. Our accommodation is so limited, the space so cramped——”

“I have arranged all that. Miss Delafield will have my room.”

“And you?”

“*I?* Oh, I shall swing a hammock in the passage; I have often done it before.”

CHAPTER XI.

FOR the next two days there can be no manner of doubt that the inhabitants of 4, More Mansions are inconveniently thick upon the ground. To two of the ladies thus brought into such close juxtaposition this overcrowding is a matter of supreme indifference. The newcomer, indeed, evidently regards it as a delightful picnic—a piquant and salutary change from the large and luxurious dulness of Grosvenor Square. Her one heartfelt regret is that it is not she who is to swing in the hammock.

With a rather acrid interest Althea watches the stranger taking the fences over which she herself had so sadly bungled, and speculates whether the superior gusto with which she attacks the unappetising food is due to the fact that she knows that the experiment is to end in forty-eight hours, or to some superior toughness of fibre. The amusement with which she sees her own history repeated is so diluted by other feelings as to be hardly amusement at all.

The fact that Lord and Lady Lanington are entirely ignorant of their daughter's escapade, but think her,

during a short absence of their own, safely chaperoned by an aunt, though imparted to her as a good joke, does not strike her as highly comic; neither does the possibility of Edward's discovering his beloved's freak, and attributing to her—Althea—the credit of it.

But superior in pain to either of these causes of disquiet is the discovery of what unsuspected capacities for jealousy lie in her own breast. Faustina is, if possible, more demonstratively tender than ever to her when they are alone; but the memory of the rise of their reciprocal devotion is too recent for her not to be able to trace an exact reproduction of its earlier stages in Miss Bateson's method of recommending herself to the newcomer. Little tricks of phrase, slight but expressive caresses, which she had believed to belong to her alone, she now sees to have an equal fitness of application to another.

Faustina's apparent unconsciousness of giving any cause for offence, coupled with her own sense of shame at harbouring such suspicions of her *alter ego's* fidelity, make her struggle painfully against her wounded feelings during the two days of Miss Delafield's visit; but on the morning of her departure Althea's self-command breaks down under a new and final provocation.

"I am afraid, darling, I must let you go to the committee meeting at the Pickaxe Club this afternoon by yourself. Cressida has asked me——"

“*Cressida!* Have you got to ‘Cressida’ already?”

“How long was it before I got to ‘Althea’?”—with sly tenderness.

“Do you mean to imply that this is a parallel case?”

Faustina looks at her flushed subaltern with a cool surprise—cool, though her words have the customary boiling affection.

“A parallel case! Is it likely, my own? But you are not going to pick a quarrel with me because I wish to escort the poor little girl to her aunt’s door? She has to go there for a night or two, so as to hoodwink her people.”

“Does not it strike you that that is rather underhand?”

Miss Bateson makes a gesture of supreme indifference.

“Parents have only themselves to thank if, in their efforts to make water run uphill, they develop duplicity in their children.”

Althea is too angry to rejoin—a result of the situation which the soothing tone of her friend’s next words seems calculated to meet.

“You may be very sure, sweetest, that I shall not go beyond the door, as the old Countess is, it seems, a ten-fossil-power obstructive.”

In ordinary times Althea would not have felt the

smallest inclination to take up the cudgels for the lady in question, but to a wrathful hand no weapon comes amiss.

"Are not you rather fond of calling names?" she asks, in a very quiet voice, which yet strikes a sort of surprised alarm into Faustina's stout heart; and without giving her time to reply to the not very conciliatory question, the younger woman goes on:

"That reminds me to ask you whether you would give up always alluding to my people as 'Philistines' and 'Philistia'? It did not matter once in a way when we were alone, but a crystallised joke becomes tiresome, do not you think?"

"I had not an idea that you minded."

"I mind very much. As I am very fond of my brother Edward, it hurts me a good deal to hear him spoken of to a perfect stranger as Goliath of Gath."

Faustina's cheek takes on its rare and dusky flush.

"Why did not you mention it before?" she asks in a tone of real and unresentful concern. "Of course, you shall never have to complain of it again. Do not you know that I had rather cut out my tongue than that it should wound you? I am afraid I am not very sensitive myself; my life of struggle has not allowed me to be so; and sometimes my high spirits run away with me. Forgive my clumsiness, dear, and believe that I

had rather die a thousand deaths than give your tender spirit the very least wound!"

The *amende* is magnificent, and puts Althea completely in the wrong, as she remorsefully feels; but that does not hinder her being very wretched, as she sees from the gimcrack little one-foot balcony of their drawing-room the two other ladies gaily get into their hansom, and trot away behind a good fresh horse.

The wretchedness pursues her through the committee meeting, conscientiously attended, where she has to excuse Miss Bateson's non-appearance, and be made to feel how poor a substitute she is for her. It buses home with her to the flat, which she finds still empty of its joint occupier. The servant has gone out, and the dispirited girl has not energy to make herself a cup of tea.

Among her more real grievances, the rather fanciful one of the epithet used by Faustina to her takes an undue and ridiculous prominence. The adjective "tender" is generally held to be a flattering one; but when applied to a "spirit," it carries with it a sense of incapacity, brittleness, futility.

Since the word "Out" is, as she believes, still affixed to her name in the hall below, it is with no expectation of a visitor, but rather of a tradesman or of the truant Eliza, that Althea answers in person the sharp, quivering thrill of the electric bell.

"You *are* in! The porter told me you had been back half an hour, and"—lowering a cautious voice, and peeping through the half-opened door before venturing a bronze shoe over the threshold—"nobody else at home?"

"Nobody; I am absolutely and entirely alone."

Thus reassured, Clare, for it is she, steps in, though still hesitating.

"And are you likely to be alone for a few minutes?"

"That is more than I can tell you. I am expecting Faustina back at any moment."

The answer is made without any symptom of indignation at the implied hope of avoiding Miss Bateson, a fact which her sister notes with inward surprise, and is accompanied by a warm hug, and an "Oh, I *am* glad to see you! How nice of you to come!"

There can be no doubt as to the verity of the feeling expressed; nor is Mrs. Boteler the person to risk hurting the feelings of even anyone whom she disliked by rebutting their endearments; and yet there is undoubted embarrassment in her way of rather accepting than returning her sister's kisses.

"Do not be too sure that it *is* nice of me."

"What do you mean?"

"Do not be too sure that I have not come to make myself disagreeable."

"To make yourself disagreeable! Oh, do not, do not!"

There is such a piercing accent of appeal in the words that Clare looks at her curiously.

"Why not? Do you mean that anyone has been beforehand with me?"

"No, no; rather the other way. But why should you? I have not done anything fresh, have I?"

To this rather plaintive cry for mercy Mrs. Boteler's answer is delayed, through the distraction of her attention to a fresh object. They have reached the drawing-room, which can hardly be said to be looking its best.

"My dear creature!" looking round with a sort of gasp. "What a dog-hole! and *how* untidy!"

Althea's pale face takes on a faint red.

"Very busy people cannot have everything in as apple-pie order as those who do nothing, and have a score of lackeys to help them."

The phrase is Batesonian. A year ago Althea would never have thought of alluding to a footman as a "lackey"; and in her own ear it perhaps rings a little offensively, for she adds in quite a different key:

"We are not generally in such disorder; but just before she left Faustina turned out a whole drawerful of papers in search of a list of members of a society, which she wanted to show to——"

Miss Vane makes a sudden break off.

"To show to Cressida Delafield," says Clare, finish-

ing the sentence in a cold voice. "You need not hesitate to mention her; I know that she has been staying here."

Once again Althea reddens.

"Yes; she has been here for two days."

She begins as she speaks, partly to hide her own emotion, partly to clear a seat for her sister, to make short work with Faustina's literary litter, a labour in which she is arrested by Clare's next sentence, spoken almost under her breath.

"And you were Edward's favourite sister!"

The past tense used in such a connection would always have cut Althea to the quick; but just now, when she has been feeling so heart and homesick, it goes nigh to oversetting her.

"You need not tell me that I no longer am so," she answers drearily; "but I do not see what that has got to say to it."

"I own that he has not been quite fair to you, poor old fellow! but, oh, I did not think you would have stooped to such a revenge!"

Althea makes no answer. She has sat down, a sort of dismal pleasure in seeing how much injustice can be heaped upon her from all sides tying her tongue.

But from her silence Clare draws the natural, though erroneous, inference of her acquiescence.

"I told you that you need not thank me for com-

ing. My one object was to beg you—but I fear I might have saved my labour—to choose some other victim.”

Still silence.

“She was quite inclined to like him until you set her against him.”

Silence.

“She will never do you any credit; she is really very silly—far sillier than Fanny.”

Silence.

“I cannot but think you might have spared her.”

It is a provision of Nature that, when an emotion becomes too acute to be represented by the words or action appropriate to it, it borrows those used to portray its opposite. There is a joy that can speak itself only in tears, and when vexation has reached its most poignant degree it translates itself by a laugh.

Althea has now attained to that pitch, and she bursts out laughing.

“You must forgive me,” she says; “but do you imagine that it was by my invitation that Cressida Delafield came here?”

“By whose else?”

Althea has risen, and two steps bring her face to face—with angry eyes on a level—to her sister.

“Then, let me tell you”—she feels a sensible relief in thus venting her pent passion—“that you can’t

detest her being here more cordially than I did and do!"

There is no mistaking the accent of truth that rings through this fiery disclaimer, and the anger in Mrs. Boteler's eyes dies into bewilderment.

"But I do not understand. If you did not ask her, who did? I happen to know that less than a week ago she did not know that—did not know Miss Bateson."

"She scraped acquaintance with her at a meeting."

"And you had no hand in it?"

To Althea such a question hardly seems worth answering, and her brief "None!" making Clare still maintain a dubious silence, she bursts forth with concentrated indignation:

"Is it because I have tried to live my life by my lights, however dim, that you have thought me capable of such baseness?"

Mrs. Boteler's answer is to turn the hose of her resentment upon an object which she is always delighted to deluge.

"It was Faustina's doing, of course! I might have known it. She never could bear him!"

"Faustina has some better employment in life than the wreaking of petty spite," rejoins the younger sister in a tone which makes Mrs. Boteler feel extremely small, "even if she knew that there was a spite to

wreak; but, little as you may believe it, I am not in the habit of regaling her with my family's weaknesses."

"You mean that she does not know about poor Ned?"

"She knows as little as she would care if she did know."

"Then, what *could* have been her motive?"

"If you can conquer your prejudices enough to credit her for once with an innocent one, you may believe that it was simply because Miss Delafield expressed a wish to see how people like us—working women—lived."

The expression grates upon Clare's ear—it is probable that it was meant to do so—almost as much as the icy tone, so different from the tender expansion of her sister's earlier greeting, chills her.

"I hope she was pleased with the experiment," she says dryly.

"I believe so; in fact"—with bitterness—"she will probably repeat it before long."

Mrs. Boteler throws out her hands with a gesture of desperation.

"Then Ned will go mad!"

"Judging from his actions, he is not far from it already!"

The tone is one of ire still well on the boil, but Clare does not seem to notice it.

"Cannot you hinder it? But of course you can! Your paramount influence with Faustina——"

Althea winces. Is her influence indeed so paramount? But she only says:

"Do you think it easy to tell persons that their acquaintance is considered so damaging that they are requested to withdraw it?"

"Oh, there are ways of doing things!" cries Clare urgently; "you know that as well as I. Tell her how little credit Cressida will ever do her. What a fool she is! She is really far sillier than Fanny."

As Fanny has always been the recognised *foolometer* of the Vane family, neither of the sisters sees anything unkind or unusual in the comparison.

"I could not say anything in detraction of her," says Althea sadly and proudly; "it would be unworthy; and, besides, it would look like jealousy."

There is an uneasy pause, broken by the visitor.

"It is not so much, or, at least, not *only*, Faustina's influence that he dreads; he has a terror of her meeting *men* here—men of the type of—of that Mr. Drake, who has a sort of good looks, has not he? and is a plausible kind of person. Though Cressida looks such a baby, she is nearly of age; and Ned is in terror lest this Mr. Drake, or someone like him, should try to get hold of her for the sake of her fortune."

To Mrs. Boteler's unfeigned surprise, Althea's first

answer to this speech is a deluge of crimson that submerges face and throat. It is followed by words that match it:

"I should have thought that one who had given up twenty thousand pounds a year for conscience' sake scarcely came under the head of a vulgar and mercenary adventurer."

Clare's jaw drops.

"Twenty thousand a year! But are you sure of it?"

"Quite sure."

"Did he tell you so himself?"

A slight ironic curl of Althea's lip shows that she detects the implied incredulity.

"No; I was told by another person."

Miss Vane alludes thus vaguely to her authority because she is aware that, if she gave it up, an even superior degree of disbelief to that already shown by her sister would attend it.

"Twenty thousand a year!" repeats Clare, in that tone of deep respect which in the mouth of even the best of Britons always attends the mention of a large sum of money. "Then why was he ki——"

"Kicked out of society!" says Althea, snatching the words out of her sister's mouth, as if she could not bear to hear them uttered by any tongue but her own. "If you remember, in former ages of the world there were people to whom the same thing happened; they even

went a step further, and wandered about in sheepskins and goatskins——”

“My dear Thee!”—in shocked interruption—“are you classing this man with the saints?”

The never-quite-ebbed red rushes back over Althea's cheeks as the outraged commonsense of Clare's words brings home to her the fact that she is making a fool of herself. But she does what is, perhaps, the wisest course to pursue in such a case—she sticks to her guns, and even fires a new volley with yet more smoke and smell of sulphur than before.

“I class him with the martyrs of humanity, the noble and good, who in all ages have been wronged and misinterpreted by the ignoble because they were incapable of comprehending them.”

This tirade has for the moment the effect of reducing its auditor to a dismayed silence, and it is in a tone of shocked apprehension that she at length brings out the words:

“You take up the cudgels very warmly for him. If I had had any idea that he was such an intimate friend of yours——”

“I never said that he was a friend of mine; it is no question of friendship. But I have suffered too much myself from being misjudged and misunderstood not to stand up for anyone whom I see wronged, though in a thousandfold greater degree, in the same way.”

The speech is hostile, but the voice is so trembling, and the eyes so bright with imminent tears, that no feeling of anger—rather one of yearning pity and affection—is produced by the somewhat offensive words in Clare's heart.

"Do not you think that you may have misunderstood us a little, too?" she asks sadly. "And as to—Mr. Drake, I dare say that Ned may have been misinformed about him; and in any case we need not say more about him, as I feel sure that there is no cause for alarm in the case of Cressida Delafield with regard to him."

Whether intentionally or not, she lays a slight stress upon the name—a stress which conveys to her hearer the impression that the freedom from danger is limited to the lady indicated. It makes another lady turn away and begin to finger uneasily and unconsciously Faustina's papers. In spite of Clare's assertion that there need now be no further mention of Drake, her very next speech relates to him:

"Is he one of the Devonshire Drakes?"

"Yes; at least"—she would have weakly liked to leave the "Yes" unqualified, but conscience forbids—"his mother was."

"And his father?"

"His father owns a chemical factory in the East End, which brings him in twenty thousand a year."

“And which this man will not inherit?”—with an accent of scarcely-veiled regret.

Althea draws her head up proudly, as if proclaiming some noble deed done by one near akin to her.

“He has renounced it because he has a foolish prejudice against fattening upon the hearts’ blood of his fellow-creatures, and for such a crime society has naturally kicked him out.”

CHAPTER XII.

THE project of introducing Miss Vane to the scene of his labours in Canning Town is too dear to Drake's heart to be let go; and he does not rest till he has found a means of combining its execution with what he would not for worlds, even to his own heart, call Althea's prudery. Since not all the generous precepts of Faustina can reconcile Miss Vane to making such an excursion *tête-à-tête*—and, indeed, he has never gone near to repeating the overture—he has called to his aid a female friend and fellow-worker of his own, who, with a newly-married and like-minded husband, has pitched her tent in the Settlement; and under her auspices, with Drake for guide, Althea had visited each and every portion of the work—infirmity, lodging-house, recreation hall, lads' club, residence, etc. Her quiet yet fervid appreciation of the energy, the method, the selfless, tireless industry, the high hope, the large love, that have gone to build this unpretending ark in the middle of the wretched human sea around, seems to him to set upon his share of labour a crown far beyond his deserts.

To her the realisation of the post he occupies—modestly, yet worthily, filled—in that great army, of which she feels herself to be but a lagging straggler, gives her a reasonless personal exultation. She does not think it necessary to mention to Miss Bateson that first visit, any more than those which follow it, explaining to herself her silence by the knowledge that Faustina has quarrelled with the Warden of the Settlement.

Althea has more time on her hands than during the first portion of her stay at More Mansions. Neither she nor Drake puts the perception into words, but both are keenly aware that Faustina, under one pretext or another, is more and more separating her so lately inseparable comrade from her own work. When they are together, she is, if possible, more effusive than ever; but the shower of sugared phrases that hail round the younger girl when in presence cannot blind her to the fact, that, as regards all serious concerns, a daily deeper fosse is being dug between them. It is in part, though only in part, to ease the ache of her bitter pain at the withdrawal of that confidence, which had once been so full and complete, that she has sought the distraction of other interests.

“Shall you want me this evening, Faustina?” she asks one day.

Faustina is writing, but looks up for a second.

“Do not I always want you?”

"But have you any special employment for me?"

"Any special employment?" repeats Miss Bateson. "Not that I can think of at this moment; but even if I had, do you suppose that I should allow myself to tyrannise over your disposal of your time?"

"I only put the question because I rather wish—I have been asked——" She stumbles, embarrassed, and the other comes to her aid.

"Do not tell me—never tell me what you wish to do, but *do* it. The maintenance of individual liberty is the true basis of friendship."

Althea is by no means sure that she admires this magnificent axiom, which rings rather differently from some of its predecessors shrined in her memory; but at least it leaves her untrammelled for the social evening in Canning Town, which is the engagement she has alluded to. On this occasion she is herself to give the tea and entertainment to the club of factory girls; and though the manner of her dismissal has sent her off with rather a weighted heart, yet by the time she reaches Liverpool Street it is sensibly lightened.

Drake meets her at the station, and they walk up together to the house of his ally, Mrs. Crabbe, where they are to have a preliminary tea on their own account.

"I am afraid you will find us rather rough to-night," he says, as they pace the broad mean thoroughfare in

happy comradeship—"since at your request the girls have been given leave to bring their friends."

He glances sideways at her a little doubtfully, but she takes the news with joyous lightness; it even seems to put a more dancing gaiety into eye and step.

"You need not try to frighten me."

"I only want to prepare you. The 'friends' are often job hands, who are always much rougher than the regular ones. They are of the class who go hop-picking, and have not a very high standard of politeness."

She looks back at him cheerfully.

"All the better; we shall have the more glory in humanising them."

The entertainment is not held in the large recreation hall, but in a smaller room, which it is supposed will meet the requirements of the invitations issued. A slight misgiving as to the accuracy of this calculation assails the breasts of the organisers of the feast, as their little party, swelled by the amateur performers whom Althea has pressed into her service, enter the room, and see how thickly the benches are already packed.

But at first there seems no need for Drake's warning to Althea, since the expectant audience are behaving nearly as well as if they were seated in St. James's Hall.

Althea makes her way among them, speaking to

those she knows. She has already made a good many friends on former occasions, particularly in a group of girls whom Drake has pointed out to her as having been turned off by their employer for having given evidence to the factory inspector of having been worked over-hours. On her last visits she had danced with them, trying to teach them the pretty measures that D'Egville had taught her, and had essayed to persuade them that the human face is not really improved by being ringed or half ringed by a semicircle of patent hair-curlers. It has puzzled her to reflect for what great occasions the imprisoned locks can be set free, since she has never seen her young friends without their hair-curlers. She has even consulted Drake, but he has been unable to enlighten her.

To-night she finds that, though the inventor has bested her, his votaries bear her no malice for her unsuccessful effort to dethrone him, but greet her with loud acclaim. She is still responding to their greetings, when Drake makes his way to her through the crowded rows.

"I think we had better begin; it is no use waiting till they have all come; there seems no end to the arrivals."

He glances a little anxiously towards the doorway, which is filled with would-be enterers, beyond whom glimpses of a sea of velvet hats and hired ostrich-

plumes still surging up the stairs is caught. She nods assentingly.

"My party is going to be the success of the season."

The first two performers mount the platform, and execute a noisy duet—how noisy is only noticed when its cessation proves how large a clamour it has been covering. The "friends" are still thronging in, and a rising excitement is apparent among the girls, a pushing and hustling—perfectly good-humoured, as is evidenced by the loud laughter that accompanies it, but not quite reassuring to the onlookers. The duet is succeeded by a song, but there is a delay before it can be uttered with any chance of being heard, and the partial lull that had accompanied it is made up for by a redoublement of tempest at its close. All the available seats have long been seized upon, and every inch of standing-room is now more than filled, while elemental sarcasm and loud repartee begin to be bandied about, and the wail of a cross and uncomfortable baby pierces the air. The tea-table is set along the wall close to the door of entrance at the back of the room, and in front of it the giver of the feast has taken her stand, in a space between it and the last row of chairs, which would have been ample had the number of the guests not so far outswelled what had been expected. As it is, the limits assigned to her sway have been so hope-

lessly overstepped that she begins very seriously to wish that she could get behind the board that groans with her intended hospitality. But this is impossible. The table is long and heavy, and in the packed state of the room it would be impossible to move it without serious risk. Althea looks round, with incipient nervousness, for Drake; but his turn is come, and he has just succeeded on the platform a lady who, with a relieved air, has borne away the violin on which she has been performing a classical solo. Althea has never heard Drake sing, and for a few minutes she forgets the discomfort of her own position in the pleasure of listening to him. For these few minutes the pressure around her is less, the audience paying to him the tribute, which they have denied to every previous performance, of an almost entire cessation of punching and giggling.

“Jack’s the boy for work,
Jack’s the boy for play,
Jack’s the lad
When girls are sad
To kiss their tears away.”

Down the long room, through the hot and loaded atmosphere, the pleasant tenor comes ringing. They applaud uproariously both singer and sentiment. But the performer who takes his place is not so fortunate in enchaining their attention. It is a little lady, who embarks on a recitation of a gently comic character. Her

voice is not a strong one, and is evidently rendered lower and more indistinct by her having to face an audience of so unruly a kind. Facetious comments upon performer and performance begin to be distressingly audible; but it is at the back of the room that the sedition is growing most alarming. It has been arranged that tea is to be served as soon as the trembling lady on the platform shall have ended; and, with this view, boiling water has, at some peril to life and limb, owing to the press, just been poured into the urns. Whether the sight is too much for the patience of the hungry and frolicsome girls, or that the spirit of horse-play is too potent to be any longer kept within bounds, certain it is that at this point one of the guests makes a snatch at a bun. Her nearest neighbours follow suit; others pillage the cake and bread-and-butter dishes; and one or two seize cups and turn the taps of the urns. The depredations have been begun by the standing ones, but those who have seats are determined not to be behindhand, and with horror Althea sees them scrambling over their chair-backs and hasting as fast as the encumbered nature of the ground will let them to the buffet.

The pressure around her is growing suffocating, and in another second she feels that it must pin her crushed and helpless against the wall. But she tries to keep her presence of mind, and to find words cogent enough

to make an impression upon the riotous but still quite good-humoured mass around her. That her appeal is not altogether vain is evidenced by a voice that she hears from the direction of the chairs, whence the stampede is still continuing, a voice addressing its neighbours in urgent entreaty:

“For Gawd’s sake, sit down!”

But the spirit of misrule is too fully at large to be reined in by any such invocation, and the sounds begin to come huskily from Althea’s oppressed chest, when she becomes aware, by an additional squeezing and cramming of the rioters around her, that someone is making vigorous efforts to clear a way through their mass, and in another second, to her infinite relief, she sees Drake shouldering his way with little ceremony to her side.

It is a long minute yet before he reaches her, but his voice rings out clear and sharp ahead of him:

“Are not you ashamed of yourselves? Go back to your seats; and those who have not any, stand still.”

It is the same voice whose utterance of the swaggering sailor song they have so lately applauded, and its effect is instantaneous. The pillaging hands cease to pillage, and there is an evident, though only partial, effort to obey him. It enables him to gain Althea’s side—was she ever before so glad to see him? though even at this moment it flashes upon her as a revelation that

she has never been anything but glad—and, putting her behind him, he stands shieldwise before her, while again his voice rings out.

“Is this your gratitude to the lady who is so kindly giving you this entertainment? If this is the way that we treat her, do you think that she is very likely to come among us again?”

Whether it is that his audience are touched by his thus bracketing himself with them, or subdued by the authority of his tones, is uncertain, but for a moment or two the tumult dies into almost silence. There is an evident disposition among the major part of the offenders to comply with Drake's request as far as they are able; but a proportion of less well-dispositioned girls still try to revive the subsiding riot by fresh shoving and horse-play and loud personalities.

It is just touch and go which element gains the upper hand, when the arrival of a timely aid, in the shape of several male members of the Settlement, decides the question. In ten minutes order is almost entirely restored, and in another the abundant libations of tea poured on the floor, through the turning of the urn-taps, have been wiped up, fresh tea made, and the rifled cake and bread-and-butter dishes replenished.

“It is all right now. I can get you out into the open air quite easily.”

She looks back at him with a spirited, pale smile.

"Why should you get me into the open air? I am not faint."

"Appearances are deceitful, then. If you take my advice——"

"I do not think it at all likely——"

"You will let me escort you to Mrs. Crabbe's house, where you can be cool and rest."

"I do not want to be cool and rest. I want to pour out tea."

"You have not had enough yet?" with eyebrows raised, and an expressive glance at a large area of tea-stains on her linen gown.

"Not nearly."

She is still very white, and her limbs trembling from the stress of her late encounter; but her look is so cheerfully radiant, and her words so determined, that he makes no further effort to dissuade her. Only he keeps near her through the rest of the function to ward off any possible repetition of disorder.

No sign of any such occurs; the second part of the programme is gone through peacefully, and at its close the girls troop out in orderly good-humour. Althea's hand would have been glad if quite so many had not insisted on shaking it, but her heart does not endorse the sentiment.

Later, Drake walks with her to the station, through the street alive with its ugly evening noisiness, but over-

smiled by a great moon. She has forgotten to think whether it is proper, and knows only that it is pleasant. Her gown is torn, her legs still shake, but her heart is strangely light.

"I still think that my party was the success of the season," she says, with gay defiance of contradiction of her paradox.

It strikes him that he has never seen her gay before; and how well it becomes her!

"You had a pretty bad moment, too, in the course of it."

"Yes, *one*. It was not a pleasant idea to be *spatch-cocked* against the wall; but the instant I saw you I knew that it was all right."

The phrase, so innocently turned, stirs him too deeply for him to find an answer, and she prattles happily on:

"And they were so nice afterwards! Did you see how they shook hands with me? And some of them wiped my gown with their own pocket-handkerchiefs, and one of them lent me a smelling-bottle."

"It was the least they could do, after nearly squeezing the life out of you," he answers with a slight shudder, adding, as if in excuse for his emotion: "It might have been an extremely nasty accident."

She goes on—he has never known her so talkative:

"It was our own fault. We ought to have had the

big hall. Next time, if we invite 'friends,' we must have the big hall."

"*Next time?* Will there ever be a next time? Do you mean to say that, after the way in which we have treated you to-night, you will ever venture among us again?"

They have reached the station, and by one consent pause facing each other, ere entering it. Her gay excitement gives way to a touched gravity.

"*Ever venture among you again!*" she says, repeating his words. "Do you know that sometimes—often of late—it has struck me that, if it were not for Faustina and all I owe her, I should like to come among you for good!"

CHAPTER XIII.

It is in a very much brighter mood than she has for some time enjoyed that Althea, on the following morning, is walking through the Park on an errand for Faustina. She does not pry too nicely into the component parts of her good spirits, though, if the question were pressed, she could give a very handsome and creditable account of them.

But there is no use to seek officiously an explanation of her unwonted light-heartedness; and she enjoys it, as she does the flower-beds between Stanhope and Grosvenor Gates, which are just beginning to develop the intricate beauty of their bedded-out patterns, and console the "fond gazer" for the departed hyacinths and tulips.

She is quickening her pace as she nears the Marble Arch, and the floral temptations to linger lessen, when she is aware that one of the carriages rolling in the same direction as herself is pulling up at the rails alongside of her.

She has got into the habit of not looking at the occupants of any of the barouches and victorias that

pass or meet her, in order to avoid the tiresomeness of recognition by some of the former acquaintances from whom her present course of life has separated her; but a glance at the large smart vehicle which has evidently stopped *à son intention* is now unavoidable, and in its solitary occupant she at once recognises the mother of Cressida Delafield.

Despite her real innocence of any sin against Lady Lanington's peace, she is the one of her late society whom she would least soon have come across; and it is with a sinking heart that, in obedience to the sound of her own name, she now stays her steps.

"Oh, Miss Vane, I am going in your direction."

An earnest desire to avoid the "lift" so obviously about to be offered is "writ so large" on Althea's face that the person who has addressed her adds hastily:

"Indeed, in whatever direction you are going—it is all one to me—may I take you?"

To so limitless an invitation refusal is out of the question, and the girl—since the blessed "I had rather not," which would rescue us all from so many unpleasant pleasures, is relegated to Utopia—with a civil answer and leaden heels, walks on the few necessary steps to the next opening in the railings, and in another moment the two ladies are seated side by side, and the vehicle, after Althea has given an address of which the coachman feels, or feigns, a dignified ignorance, rolls on again,

"I wanted so much to meet you," is the elder's opening.

The younger is so very far from echoing this wish that a smile, which may pass at a pinch for one of acquiescence, is the "nearest thing she can do" to it.

"I thought of writing to you."

"Did you?"

"But I could not help feeling that a personal appeal would be better."

"An—an appeal?"

"Only I did not know how to manage it. You are never to be seen anywhere about now, and Cressida has positively refused to give me your address."

"Indeed!"

"I was so fond of your father, and I always used to like you so much."

The exceeding discomfort of Althea's mind in her present situation is here crossed by the bitter reflection that whoever now speaks of a liking for her puts it into the past tense.

"It—it was very good of you!" she stammers baldly.

"How little I thought in those days—I mean during your dear father's lifetime—that it would be *your* hand which would deal me such a blow!"

"I do not know—you must please explain—what you are alluding to."

Although vaguely prepared for something disagree-

able, a look of startled dismay has come into the girl's face; but her speech has a truthful dignity that her companion is too much agitated and preoccupied to perceive.

"Oh, do not let us have any fencing!" she cries impatiently; "we both know what we mean—why should we pretend that we do not?"

"I must emphatically answer that I do not know."

The rejoinder, though made very gently and civilly, seems to drive the hearer over the limits, already reached, of self-control.

"Oh, Miss Vane, is it possible that you are going to add to the injury of having robbed me of my daughter the insult of denying it?"

The words are rude even to violence; but they produce no sense of resentment in Althea's breast. It is with a compassion largely streaked with fellow-feeling that she looks at the twitched, flushed features of the usually good-natured, well-bred woman beside her.

"You are mistaken. I am truly sorry that you imagine anyone has robbed you of your daughter; but I assure you it is not I."

"No doubt you do not call it robbing"—in a perfectly unconvinced and still more exasperated key—"but that is a mere quibble; you *did* rob me of her by introducing her to that horrible, horrible woman who——"

"If you are alluding to Miss Bateson, I must again repeat that I did not introduce them to each other; I do not even know who did."

"But for you she would never have known her—never have wished to know her! It was your example—your *fatal* example——"

Althea has turned very pale. There are limits even to her patience.

"Will you mind setting me down?" she says in a low voice. "I do not see that any purpose is served by my staying with you; you do not believe a word I say."

The request brings Lady Lanington back in some measure to a recollection of the claims of good manners, forgotten as they always are when the elemental emotions have us in their clutch.

"Oh, pray do not go! I have so much more that I want to say to you. I had no intention of being rude; the words escaped me. I really scarcely know what I am doing or saying!"

Her agitation is so painfully obvious, and the passion that dictates it has so clearly broken down all the dykes of good-breeding and habit, that Althea's short-lived wrath dies out.

"I would not mind what kind of things you said to me," she rejoins gently, "if it did you any good; but indeed I think you are making yourself unnecessarily

miserable. As far as I am aware, Miss Delafield and the person whose influence you so much dread for her never now meet except in the most casual passing way."

"*Never now meet!*" repeats the other, in a tone of indignant incredulity; and the eyes which, at the softness of the girl's answer, had begun to twinkle behind her *pince-nez* with tears, now blaze again with angry distrust.

Althea's heart sinks, but she replies steadily:

"Never, upon my honour, to my knowledge, except in the way I have mentioned." Then, as her companion continues to glare at her with ireful disbelief, she adds: "Miss Delafield spent two nights at our flat upon Miss Bateson's invitation, but that was weeks ago; and since then——"

"Since then you are under the impression that they have never met?"

"I have never heard of their having done so."

The perfect steadiness with which Althea sustains the mother's angry scrutiny seems at length to convince the latter of the truth of her asseverations, for she says, in a changed key:

"If that is your belief, I can only tell you that they have been keeping you in the dark."

"What do you mean?"

"What do I mean? I mean that, so far from the intimacy between my daughter and that—that person

being at an end, as you seem to imagine, not a day—scarcely a day passes without their spending hours of it together. In Cressida it has become a madness, a frenzy; in the other—well, as she is your friend, I will not qualify it; but if she were not, I should say that it is an iniquitous case of child-stealing!”

While Lady Lanington, with growing excitement, has been running up the gamut of her woes, the knowledge has come coldly home to Althea that she had had an instinctive foreboding of what is now being told her all along. None the less does the certainty of her supersession, and of the smashing of her ideal, strike her dumb and unprotesting.

“She used to be such a dear, affectionate child—never very strong-minded, but so loving and nice”—this very falteringly “and now—— Oh, tell him to drive on anywhere—round the Park—anywhere”—this to the footman, who has got down to ask for minuter directions as to Althea’s obscure destination. “And *now!* She is to come of age next month. Unfortunately, she is quite independent of us pecuniarily, as she inherits from an uncle; and last night she told us, her father and me—oh, I can scarcely bear to repeat it——”

“What did she tell you?”

“I can hardly believe it even now; it seems incredible!”

“Yes?”

"If anyone had prophesied it to me six months ago, I should have laughed in their face."

"But you have not yet told me what it is."

"She told us—and oh, Miss Vane, to think that we should owe it (indirectly, at all events) to *you!*—that she was weary of the idle, senseless, soul-numbing existence she was compelled by us to lead, and that since, while she remained with us, all her best energies were paralysed, and she was prevented from following out the high ends for which she was created (I am quoting the poor child verbally), it would be best for us to part."

"PART!"

"Yes, part. And when we found words to remonstrate with her—at first, as you may imagine, we were paralysed with grief and astonishment—she quoted you as a triumphant instance of a girl who had cut herself adrift from family ties for conscience' sake."

The "triumphant instance" does not much justify the adjective assigned to her, as she sits wide-eyed in wretched listening. Among the chaos of painful feelings in which Lady Lanington's words are making her welter, one has risen prominently to the surface. It dictates the speech which comes—half hurry, half lag—across her lips.

"If she is going to part from you and Lord Lan-

ington, whom does she mean to join? She will not live alone, I suppose?"

"She absolutely refused to answer that question when it was put to her; but I can guess—I can guess! I thought that you were her accomplice; but I begin to believe—I quite believe—that you are not."

To a proposition so monstrous as that she has been wielding the axe to cut off her own head, Althea is incapable of a rejoinder.

"But that is not the worst—not nearly the worst! Oh, I hardly know how to tell you! putting it into words seems to make it worse. Do you know—because, if you do, it will spare me the shame of telling you; but I see by your face that you do not—do you know the kind of work that my poor insane child is going to devote herself to?—she told us so to our faces!"

"What work?"

"I would not have believed it on any less evidence—at *her* age, with *her* appearance——"

"Oh, what—WHAT? Why do not you tell me?"

Althea has unconsciously grasped the arm of her companion that is nearest to her, and her strenuous pressure seems to squeeze out the difficult answer.

"She is going to devote her life"—with a voice sunk almost beyond the audible, and an apprehensive glance at the servants' backs—"to *rescue work*! Do you understand? At *her* age, and with *her* appearance, she

is going out into the Haymarket at night among those degraded creatures——” She breaks off, adding in another key: “You are not going to *faint*?”

“No, no; I never fainted in my life. Go on.”

“*Go on!*” repeats the other in a tone of the bitterest indignation. “Is not that enough? What more would you have?”

Apparently it is quite enough for the auditor, whose blanched rigidity of look calls forth a repetition of Lady Lanington’s just-expressed fear.

“I believe you *are* going to faint.”

“No, no!”

“Can’t you help me? Can’t you do something to prevent such a crime, such an *outrage*? You must have influence with this woman, since you gave up everything—quarrelled with your whole family—for her sake.”

“I have never quarrelled with my whole family”—faintly.

“Oh, what does it matter what you call it? I will call it by what name you like; but you cannot deny that there is entire separation between you and them, and that she is the cause. In return, you must have some influence with her; you cannot deny that you have influence with her, if only you would use it.”

The mother’s tone has changed from a key of bitterest upbraiding to one of almost abject entreaty,

and to emphasise her request she wrings the girl's fingers with an even tighter grip than Althea, in the height of her excitement, had used a few moments ago towards herself.

Althea almost laughs. HER INFLUENCE! But even now she cannot bear to admit to a third person the only half-realised depth of her own fall.

"What would you have me do?"

"Do! Why, go to her, beg her, entreat her, command her—you know what arguments have most hold on such a—such a—to let my child go! She will be able to find plenty more victims to infect with her pestilent opinions! Is not it enough for her to have been the ruin of *you*?"

Althea gives a horrified start.

"*Ruin!* How dare you apply such a word to me?"

But the mother is off again on the track of her own woe, and does not seem to hear her.

"You cannot refuse me this reparation, such a poor one as it is, for the horrible wrong you have done me. After all, it *is* you that have done it—indirectly, at least. I should have had my child still with me if she had not learnt from you, from your example, to laugh at all constituted authorities, at religion, at decency, at whatever she had been taught to respect."

Lady Lanington pauses, not, certainly, because she

has exhausted her armoury of vituperation, but arrested by the deathly whiteness beside her, and adds:

“Oh, I do not know what I am saying. I can keep no measure, can think of nothing but——”

Under the storm of obloquy that has hailed upon her, Althea has put her hand to her head, as if some stone had hit her; but she now straightens her limp back, and sits up.

“I must again ask you to let me get out; indeed, I must insist upon it. It is necessary for me to go home at once, and inquire into the truth of the charges you have been bringing against my—my *friend*; to find out how much of mistake and misapprehension there is in them.”

“And if you find that they are *true*—TRUE—true as Gospel?”

Again the slight hand goes up to the brow that still smarts from its lapidation.

“I cannot—*cannot* believe it.”

“But *if*—IF——”

“I will not face such an *if*.”

CHAPTER XIV.

To her coachman's disgust, Lady Lanington insists upon driving Althea to the portal of her flat, in the feverish hope that the interview between the latter and Miss Bateson may be thereby hastened. During the drive the younger woman scarcely speaks, save to put a decided veto upon the elder's proposal that she shall await the result outside, and to give, on leaving her, a mechanical assent to the distracted prayer that she will not keep her in suspense one second longer than is necessary.

It is with a foggy sense of relief at being alone that Althea speeds up the dirty stairs, and with a mixed and also foggy feeling of eagerness to face the worst and desire to shove the crucial moment a little farther off that she presses her door-bell. It is the first of these aspirations which is destined to be gratified, as it is Faustina herself who opens.

One glance at Miss Bateson's face shows her house-fellow that it was not she who was expected, though to a stranger the ready ejaculation, "Back already, darling! Well, you *are* an ideal messenger!" would seem to hold

even more rapture than astonishment. The bitterness of the intuition, which shows Miss Vane that she has been hoodwinked into being got out of the way to clear the stage for her supplanter, gives her the impetus necessary for an instant rush upon the fray.

"I have not been to Rodney Street."

"No? Then, why are you back?"

Faustina is still fondly smiling, but in her tone there is the slight tang of displeasure of a General whose aide-de-camp has gratuitously disobeyed him.

"Because I met Lady Lanington."

"*Because you met Lady Lanington!* That sounds rather a *non sequitur*."

"She told me something which made it necessary that I should return home at once."

"You are dealing in riddles, dearest. If it is quite convenient to you, I should like to know what you are talking about."

The tone is playful, and might possibly have deceived Althea into a belief that her antagonist is ignorant of the coming thrust, had not she detected an instantaneous flash of consciousness in the eyes—eyes at once, and in a second, on their guard again.

They are in the drawing-room by now; and if other indications of a rising storm were wanting, the care with which Althea closes the door—a door generally left to

bang, to jar, or to gape, according to its own wild will—would suffice as a warning.

“She told me facts—a fact—about her daughter which I refused to believe.”

“Indeed! That was not very polite of you.”

“Faustina, were those facts—was that fact true?”

“As I have not any Röntgen rays to turn upon your mind, I must respectfully repeat that I am in the dark as to what you are alluding to.”

“It is useless to try and put me off with a jest. Was it—is it true?”

“Was *what*—is what true?”

The waxing pressure of the one speaker, and the waning gaiety of the other, though the latter is obviously anxious to cling as long as possible to her light tone, reveal that the stress of the storm is nigh.

“I was told by Lady Lanington that you have contracted an intimacy with her daughter.”

“Well?”

Faustina has sat down. In a quarrel the sitter has always an advantage over the stander, as evidencing a greater self-control; and her “Well?” is uttered with a cold and slightly contemptuous patience, which makes the indictment fall flat even upon the indicter’s ear.

“That you have been meeting her secretly——”

“There was no secrecy about it.”

"That you have been having daily—almost daily meetings with her all through the time during which you conveyed—implied to me that you have had no intercourse with her."

"I never conveyed or implied anything about the subject to you."

Once again there is a controlled contempt in the unhesitating answer, which, making the less-skilled combatant feel the apparent paltriness of her preliminary accusations, hurries her to the gist.

"That you have been setting her against her parents."

"Against such parents, it was the kindest thing I could do—the greatest service I could render her."

"That you have been inducing her to embrace—go in for a line of work which, though no doubt a great and necessary one when undertaken by the proper people, is grossly, indecently unsuitable for a girl of her age, character, and appearance!"

In the first part of this sentence there is an attempt at judicial calm, but the latter half comes, contrary to its utterer's intention, in intemperate, scarlet hurry.

"Are you alluding to her wish to devote herself to 'rescue' work?"

"Yes."

Faustina heaves a sigh—the kind of sigh which any and all of the world's great teachers and creed-founders

may have uttered, when the inability of their disciples to understand their lessons was brought home to them—a sigh of impatient patience.

“I suppose I had better answer your accusations in the order in which you have brought them. I *have* been seeing a good deal of Cressida Delafield.”

She pauses, as if to give her companion time for a rejoinder, but none comes, so she goes on:

“The secrecy with which you twit me consists in my not having thought it necessary to impart to you a fact whose true bearing my knowledge of your character and disposition taught me you would be unable to comprehend.”

Althea brushes a hand quickly across her eyes, not because a tear is within miles of them, but because of the mist of delusion which the tone of calm and lenient explanation with which Miss Bateson is uttering her defence is calculated to draw over them.

“As for the rescue work which I have persuaded her to take up—I do not for a moment deny that it was my suggestion, which at the first hint she seized with joyful alacrity—my defence—if defence is needed, which I am far from admitting—is that, with me, the Cause always goes before the individual. I look upon the persons whom I am able to influence primarily as its instruments, and only very secondarily in their relation to myself or to themselves.”

She shuts her lips, as if the subject were ended; and with another sigh—of relief this time—leans carelessly back in her chair. For a moment Althea clutches her temples with both hands; then she speaks:

“I do not think you have been very successful in your choice of an instrument this time.”

“No? I cannot agree with you. She has been very useful to me already.”

“Useful! In what way?”

“By her social gifts she has succeeded in obtaining for me from the proper sources that information about the Child Insurance Bill which, as you may remember, you were rather unsuccessful in getting.”

The shaft tells. A quiver of pain passes over Althea's face.

“Not that I blame you,” returns the other dispassionately. “I quite believe that you did your best.”

“I ought never to have attempted it.”

“So the result proved; but you must remember how much and often you importuned me to put you to whatever branch of work I thought you best fitted for.”

The very slight, but perceptible, flavour of contempt which seasons this speech conveys to Althea how little adapted for any labour, worthy of the name, her quondam friend regards her. It has the effect of a whiplash curling and tingling round her shoulders.

“We are wandering from the point,” she says, in a

high, strained voice. "It is no question now of me and my insufficiency, but of whether you are justified in kidnapping a foolish young girl from her home, and setting her to an employment of which it is always doubtful whether the good can predominate over the evil, but which in her case—in her circumstances—would be a disgrace—an outrage!"

The speaker stops, white and shaking; and there is a slight answering alteration in Miss Bateson's steady complexion and composed voice, when, after a moment's interval, to get herself well in hand, she replies:

"I deny, absolutely and entirely, the right of you or of anyone else to challenge my actions. I am my own judge and censor; to myself I stand or fall. But in deference to the intimacy of the relations that have subsisted between us, I am willing to give you as a favour that explanation which I refuse you as a due." She pauses, and then adds dryly: "Whether you will enjoy hearing it is another question."

"Go on."

"I spared you the knowledge of my intercourse with Cressida Delafield, not because I had any motive for concealment, but out of tenderness to you—out of consideration for a weakness which from the first I divined to exist in your character, but which until lately I hoped might remain latent. You must know that I am

alluding to that tendency towards jealousy which I have always thought somewhat unworthy of you."

Only a quickened drawing of the listener's already short-drawn breath as answer, so she goes on:

"As to your indictment of 'kidnapping a foolish young girl,' well"—with a shrug—"folly is a relative term. In some lights many of us do not appear particularly wise"—a stung start shows that the hearer has made the personal application intended—"and if to 'kidnap' is to do for her what I did for you—that is, to give her the impetus necessary for cutting herself adrift from an ignoble *entourage*—I not only admit, but I glory in, the accusation."

Still no rejoinder but that rapid breathing.

"With regard to the rescue work, which appears to be the head and front of my offending, as I have already told you, with me the Cause always goes before the individual. But even were it not so, even if I were to allow personal feeling to outweigh abstract right, I should still have no scruple in directing upon such a course one who, with no prurient squeamishness, but with a noble alacrity, leapt at the first suggestion to her post in the grandest crusade ever undertaken by humanity."

The voice is steady, the look quasi-inspired; the words are—except for the side-hit at Althea's prurience—of much the same quality as those which had often

stirred her like a trumpet-call. Bitterly she recognises this, as they now fall in dead mockery on her ear. It is a full minute before she regains utterance.

"I am to understand, then, that you refuse to loose your prey?"

"You word it offensively. But, yes, I do refuse."

"I know"—with an unsuccessful effort to imitate her companion's *sang-froid*—"that you deny the authority of the Book that gives it, but you must allow the justice of the prohibition to us to do evil that good may come."

"We start from different premises. I deny that I am doing evil."

"*Not doing evil!*"—the poor rag of judicial calm flung aside, and with an outblazing of passionate expostulation which comes much more naturally: "Is not it doing evil to lay waste a happy home, to bring desolation and ruin upon two good and innocent lives, even if the question of the girl herself is waived?"

"It cannot be waived; since it is the only one with which I have any concern."

"Does that mean that, in spite of what I have said, you are still determined to carry out your scandalous and disgraceful plan?"

"You observed to me some little while ago that I was fond of calling names. I think I might now retort the accusation."

"I do not wish to call names, because I have not—there are not any strong enough to characterise such an iniquity. But are you—you have not answered me—still determined to stick to it?"

"What reason have you given me—bluster is not reasoning—for abandoning it? But even if your powers of ratiocination were stronger than they are, they would be powerless to move me from a course of action of whose righteousness and desirability I am absolutely convinced."

"Then, all I can say is, that you will have to choose between Cressida Delafield and me."

The bolt which a month ago would have shattered the firmament, now falls apparently innocuous; and so much still remains in Althea's mind of the habit of belief in the eternity of their intimacy, that she thinks Faustina cannot have grasped her proposition. She restates it:

"If you adhere to your resolution, I shall be compelled to leave you."

"That is as you please."

"At once."

"Yes?"

"And for ever."

"We are certainly not very likely to resume our relations."

There is a cool dryness, an indifferent common-

sense, in this last sentence which oversets the other's tottering balance.

"And this is what it has come to," she says, clutching her own head with both hands, as if to assure herself that it is still on her shoulders. "After all your protestations, this is what it has come to!"

"It is what you yourself have brought it to."

With one of her grasping hands Althea hits herself on the forehead.

"Oh, how blind I have been! How right my people were! How bitterly, *bitterly* disappointed, disillusioned, I am in you!"

"And do you think," rejoins Faustina, in whom during the last apostrophes signs of some emotion have become evident, and who, in token of waning self-control, now rises from her careless sitting posture to her feet—"and do you think, pray, that *I* have not been disappointed, disillusioned, in you?"

To this agreeable inquiry Althea has no answer but dropped hands and staring eyes.

"Do you think that as week by week, day by day, the paltriness of your character unfolded itself; your inability to embrace a great design or to soar above petty details—do you think, I say, that *my* heart did not sink at the thought of the clog with which I had fettered myself?"

Again receiving no audible reply, she sails on with spread canvas.

"It is such as you, whose petulant feebleness, whose irritable self-love, whose silly conventions and minute brain-power, have brought us where we are; have palliated, justified, explained man's attitude to us."

She pauses to take in a fresh supply of breath, and Althea's voice makes itself just heard in a dreary whisper:

"That is enough! that is enough! I will go!"

"I shall make no attempt to stop you"—giving way with evident relief to a long-pent burst of frank brutality—"but please to remember that the breach comes from you; it would never have come from me. Out of loyalty to my original idea of you, and as a penance for my folly in crediting you with excellences and aptitudes of which you are conspicuously destitute, I should have gone on putting up with you, enduring even your impertinent efforts to interfere with my best-laid and most deeply considered schemes, and your contemptible willingness to be the cat's-paw of John Drake."

The storm of missiles which has been whistling round her head has had the effect of rendering Althea dizzy and deaf, but this last well-aimed flint stings her back into a cruelly full possession of her senses:

"The—cat's-paw—of—John—Drake!"

"Yes, the cat's-paw of John Drake. I do not know why you should have credited me with so much less keen sight than yourself; why you should have supposed me ignorant of those frequent meetings with him of late, which you have either *happened to forget*, or *not thought it worth while to mention*."

A sort of dimness comes before the hearer's vision. It is as if the blood of that flint-wound were dripping into her eyes and blinding her.

"Do you think that I have not seen you, in spite of all I have told you of the horror of men's lives, in spite of your hypocritical air of repulsion—do you think that I have not seen you drifting into the miserable old path, the wretched old attitude of inferiority and appeal? Has it ever struck you that, had I been cast in the same mould as you, I, too, might have played at jealousy?"

The other's answer is nothing but a groping movement towards the door, but Miss Bateson has not yet quite done with her.

"If I had not become aware of that head-strong self-opinion in you which, coupled with your intellectual weakness, makes you so impossible to deal with, I would have given you a friendly hint that, since John Drake has a rather firmer hold upon his convictions than you, your attentions to him are not likely to lead

to the only close which would seem a satisfactory one to yourself and your highly respectable family."

Then she lets her go, and the other, feeling first for the drawing-room door, and then for the outer one, stumbles off down the public stairs. Before she reaches the bottom of these, practical common-sense has resumed its sway over Faustina's mind, and she calls down the well of the staircase in much her ordinary voice:

"Your boxes shall be sent at once to whatever address you like to give."

* * * * *

In blind ignorance of the way she is taking, Althea walks along—walks on and on. She is half conscious that she has reached the Embankment by the pleasantness of the fresh air from the river. Then she walks on and on again, half blind, half deaf, every sense muffled like a knocker in a kid glove. She has reached the end of the endless length of Grosvenor Road before the sun, beating hotly on her head—she has left parasol and gloves behind—and the urgent weariness of the knees that knock together beneath her, bid her find some place of shelter.

The thought of the Aërated Bread Company passes foggily across her mind—that beneficent institution which, during the last months, has often provided her with a frugal luncheon or inexpensive tea. She has to

drag her tired limbs yet a little further before, in a street in Westminster, the welcome letters "A. B. C." salute her eyes over a shop-door. She enters, and sits down at one of the little round marble-topped tables which chances to be vacant.

At first she is conscious only of a sense of bodily relief and ease. It is not till instructed by the blank look of surprise on the face of the waitress who comes to know her requirements—surprise at the silence with which Althea stares at her—that the latter pulls herself together and orders a cup of coffee and a wheat-cake. When they come, she feels disappointed that, for want of a preciser order, the cup is a small one. She drains it at a draught: it does her the doubtful kindness of clearing her brain.

Leaning both elbows on the table, and taking her head in her two hands, she reviews her situation. An earthquake has swallowed up her home. At the memory of that so recent convulsion she shudders strongly, then glances round, afraid lest she should have been observed.

An earthquake has swallowed up her home! Where is she to find another one?

But from this question, though she is aware in a woolly way that it claims an immediate answer, mind and memory keep slipping back to the exquisite humiliation of the past interview.

It is not the absoluteness and ignominy of her failure to save Cressida, though at another time that would have given her keen pain, which is crushing her. It is not even the sight of the ignoble clay shards into which, under her eyes, her reputed god of gold and silver has flown, shivered. It is in those phrases into which Faustina had packed the poison of her final sting that lies the secret of the girl's prostration.

She had carried her white maiden pennon so high; and now it lies draggled and defiled in the filth of the public street.

"The cat's-paw of John Drake!" "Attentions to him not likely to lead to the only close!" etc. Horrible, horrible phrases! And can it be that there is a grain of infinitely more horrible truth in them? Has she paid him any attentions? Can this odious colouring be put upon that intercourse which of late has formed the only solace of her life?

Her mind, having fastened upon this point, refuses to quit it. Inquiries as to whether no further steps are possible for restoring to the Laningtons their strayed child, and also as to where Althea is to house herself for the coming night, drift across her brain, and remain indifferently unanswered.

The one question that puts itself unceasingly as the only one really worthy of response is, Has she paid attentions to John Drake? The question is asked with

shame-dropped head, and hands pentwise shading burning eyes. It is not till a step stayed beside her singles itself out from the coming and going feet in the restaurant that she snatches herself upright, and sees that the object of her anguished query is present to answer it if she will in person.

CHAPTER XV.

ALTHEA starts to her feet.

"What are you doing here?"

Drake looks at her in unfeigned surprise.

"I caught a glimpse of you through the door, and thought I would come and ask whether you are any the worse for our excursion."

"Our excursion?"

"Yes; have you already forgotten Canning Town?"

She does not answer; and, with growing alarm, he scans her more narrowly.

"Has anything happened? Are you ill?"

"No, I am not ill."

There is something so indescribably frosty and distant in her voice that he replaces the chair which he had begun to move from the table, in order to sit down opposite her.

"You had rather be alone. I will go."

His tone tells her what her own has been, and she makes a frightened effort to be natural and normal.

"I—I was not expecting you. I came in here to—to think quietly over something."

He cannot quite keep out of his eyes the earnest wish that burns behind them to know what that something is; but his hand is taken off the chair, and his whole attitude a *going* one.

She glances up at him with what he feels to be an acutely painful, strange shyness, while in her heart, through the new veil of shame and shrinking, begins to rise the old longing for his sympathy.

"Something *has* happened."

"Something that you had rather not tell me?"

"No-o. You would—everybody would have to know it soon. I have left More Mansions."

"For good?"

"Yes. Faustina and I have quarrelled!"

He forbids his face to express how little the arrival of this *dénouement* surprises him, and tries to look only sympathetic.

"Irremediably?"

"Oh, yes—yes!"

She has sat down again at the table, and her distress—her need for comfort—is so obvious that he cannot resist the temptation to sit down, too.

"I am sorry. Quarrels are such mistakes, are not they? Could I be of any use? Could not you use me as a go-between?"

This suggestion, to his consternation, drowns her in crimson.

“*You!* Oh, no—no!” Then, feeling how inevitably the violent unwisdom of her disclaimer must have made him draw the inference that he himself was the object of contention, she rushes into a true, though misleading, admission. “We quarrelled about Cressida Delafield.”

“Indeed.”

“I told Faustina that she must choose between her and me.”

“And she chose Miss Delafield?”

“Yes.”

He is silent, afraid to seem as if he would push into her confidence—a reticence the less meritorious since he knows that, having gone so far, she must go further, and unable to feign an astonishment that he is far from feeling.

“I ought to tell you that my making this stipulation was not due to a petty jealousy, as you might think, but to Faustina’s having persuaded the girl to leave her parents.”

“Faustina has not much opinion of parents”—dryly —“but why?”

“In order that she may devote her life to——”

“To *what?*”

Althea hesitates, divided between her native maiden shrinking from embarking on so scabrous a topic with a young man and the teaching of the last months, which has instructed her that all topics are to be handled in-

differently between the sexes. It is not the latter, after all, which produces her low answer:

"To rescue work."

"To *what?*"

"To rescue work"—still lower.

For a second he stares at her in stupefaction. Then:

"We cannot be referring to the same person. I thought you were alluding to the young lady whom I met at Lady Lavinia Jerome's party."

"And who complimented you upon your speech to the dockers—so I am."

"That *child!*"

"She is not such a child as you think; she is twenty-one."

He still looks bewildered.

"*Rescue work!* Why, even Faustina—and do I understand that when you remonstrated with her she refused to listen to you?"

"She insulted me grossly."

Again that smarting blush smites her like a blow, and her voice grows rigid again.

"*Insulted you grossly—how?*"

"I cannot tell you—you must never ask me!"—almost inaudibly.

His face hardens, and he stands up.

"Then, I will ask her!"

"I will never speak to you again if you do!" She, too, has started to her feet, but, recalled to herself by the publicity of the place, and still more by the unbounded wonder in Drake's eyes, sits down again. "I mean to say that it is no question of *me*; that after—after what has passed, it would be useless to try and patch up a reconciliation between me and Faustina!"

An overpowering wind of recollection seems to bow her head, and she bends before it. She looks such a monument of woe that even his curiosity fades before his earnest desire to succour her.

"And is there nothing that you will let me do to help you?"

"I do not know what there is that *you*—that any one can do."

Silenced for the moment by this finality of affliction, he can only send mute messages of cautious sympathy across her unbroken wheat-cake to her, and when he does speak, it is to make a homely suggestion.

"Had not you better eat something?"

"I could not; it would stick in my throat."

"If you will forgive my asking you, have you made any plan—thought out at all what it will be best for you to do for—just the present—for now?"

"No."

"But you will have to make up your mind—to take some step, will not you?"

"Oh, I suppose so."

There is such cold dismissal of the topic in her tone that he dares not pursue it.

Presently she begins to stir restlessly; to look about her for the gloves whose absence she has forgotten; to show feverish signs of departure.

"Are you going?"

"I am wasting time, and there is none to lose. I must take some other step. I cannot leave that girl to her fate."

There is a painful look of wool-gathering in her white face, which shows her still half stunned from her recent blow. Destitute as he is of any right to prevent her, he cannot allow her to set forth on an enterprise for which she is so plainly unfit. He interposes himself between her and the door, towards which she has turned.

"Will not you eat something first?"

"I tell you it would stick in my throat if I did."

"Will not you at least sit down again for a moment, and let us talk it over quietly?"

"What good would talking it over quietly do?"

"We might strike out something. You might see your way to let me help you."

"*You?* Oh no!"

At any other time her emphasis of negation would have hurt him; now, in the concentration of his eagerness to stop her, he passes it by.

"You might at least let me use whatever influence I have with Faustina."

Her only answer is a—to him—incomprehensible shudder.

"Perhaps you doubt my possessing any; but I really have some."

She has collapsed into her chair again—not because convinced by his arguments, but unable to trust her knocking knees. With an effort she collects her swimming thoughts to answer him.

"You did not seem to have much when you tried to persuade her about the chromate of potash."

"That is true."

Her shaking fingers begin to fidget with the spoon of her coffee-cup.

"I must think of something else. I must do something—do something—at once."

"I cannot see that you have any responsibility in the matter."

"Oh yes, I have—there are reasons. And, besides, her mother—I met her this morning; did I tell you that it was from her I heard the news?—lays all the blame upon *me!*"

"Upon *you?*"

"Yes. She says that if it had not been for my fatal example——"

Her throat seems to close.

"I would treat such gross injustice with the contempt it deserves"—indignantly.

"I am not so sure that it *is* unjust."

Seeing her thus resolute to heap ashes on her own head, he resumes the path of practical suggestion.

"Would it be any use for you to appeal to Miss Delafield herself?"

"Not the slightest."

"Or to your own people—your own family? I think they are acquainted with her?"

"No, *no!* They are the last people who must hear a word of it!"

Such a frenzy of opposition shrills in her answer to this last proposal that he looks round nervously; but the denizens of this A. B. C., like those of all others, are *stoking* themselves stolidly, unmindful of their neighbours' concerns.

"And you think the matter urgent—needing instant action? You think that Faustina will——"

She snatches the sentence away from him, as if unable to bear any ending he can put to it.

"Yes, I know it! She never lets the grass grow under her feet."

A hopeless pause. Trivial but tenderly compassionate speculations cross Drake's mind as to what she has done with her gloves, coupled with the sudden perception

that she looks ten years older than she did when he parted from her last night.

"I should be the last person to press my suggestion, if you had a better one to offer," he says at last, with deprecating respect; "but if you have not, I think I should advise you to let me try my luck with Faustina."

She looks at him desperately. Her mind seems a boiling cauldron, full of whirling thoughts, which she tries in vain to arrest and sort. After awhile a kind of order comes into the chaos, and from it issues a voice which tells her that in this proposal—the most repugnant that could possibly have been made to her—lies her only chance of averting the threatened evil. Dares she reject it? Through a species of woolly fog, her companion's voice, still urging, reaches her.

"I really have some influence with her, though I do not wonder at your doubting it; but if I put pressure on, I really have a good deal."

Silence. Her thoughts are clearing, and out of them rises in odious distinctness a horrid picture of Drake confronting Faustina—of her own name bandied about between them, sullied by the calumnies with which Miss Bateson had so freely bespattered herself, and of which she will certainly not be more sparing to her advocate—that advocate whose very partisanship will give a plausible colour to her accusations. And yet what alternative from this agony of degradation lies open to

her? In the extremity of her misery she hides her face.

“I do not know what to do; I am at my wits’ end.”

He stands beside her patiently waiting, marvelling at, and yet trying not even in his own mind to probe, the reasons of her anguished shrinking from his proposal. When he sees her a little calmer he gently repeats it:

“I think you had better trust me to do what I can for you.”

For a second or two she yields to the infinite sense of relief of having someone to lean on; then Faustina’s venomous phrases, flashing back, poison the infant fountain of her comfort at its source.

“I could not bear it—I could not bear it!”

At the obstinacy of her apparent unreason his patience gives way a little.

“I am afraid I have nothing else to suggest.”

She lifts her forlorn head quickly. Is he going? Dreadful as is his presence beside her, she suddenly realises how much more dreadful his leaving her will be.

“If—I—consent to what you propose, will you—will you—promise not to—not to listen—to—stop your ears to—any—any—any insulting accusations that she may bring against me?”

It would be invidious to say which was the more highly coloured, the young woman at making this suggestion, or the young man at hearing it.

"Is not it an insult to me to exact such a promise?"

"Oh that it should have come to this!" she says, the memory of her former infatuation wringing a little low cry out of her at its so ignominious ending.

"I would not think about that, if I were you, now."

She heaves a great sigh, and then draws her scattered wits together, as if trying to take his advice.

"If you—really mean—to carry out—your—your suggestion, I suppose it had better be—at once. She is not a person who ever loses time; and she may be meaning to put her—her scheme into execution to-ni—at once."

Deep repugnance and fevered hurry strive together in her speech, and the pitiful conflict stirs him to an even tenderer compassion than he has yet felt.

"You may depend upon me. Should I find her at home this afternoon?"

"I think so; she was evidently expecting Cressida." The corners of her mouth go down, pulled at by a very bitter recollection, and he looks at her with silent commiseration. "She has an engagement for this evening. As it is a long way off, she will set off early; so you had better be on the safe side, and go now."

Drake's heart gives a throb of pleasure at her taking his eagerness to serve her so much as a matter of course as to need neither apology nor thanks; but there is no sign of it in his answer.

"I will go as soon as I know what is to become of you."

"Of me?"

"Yes, of you."

"Oh, I do not know!"

"You must decide upon something; the day is getting on."

"Yes; I suppose so."

"Are your people in town?"

"As far as I know."

"Your sister, Mrs. Boteler?"

"I dare say."

"Will not it be best for you to be with your own family?"

"My family disapproves of me a good deal. It seems to me that most people disapprove of me."

"Do they disapprove of you enough to turn you away from their door?"

Her answer is a tarrying one. Do they? He had put the question as propounding an absurdity; but to her it seems quite within the range of possibility that they should. For weeks she has kept away from Clare, deterred by that long-unfulfilled promise; and now that what her family will look upon as the result of her bad faith has broken in thunder upon them, how can she venture to present herself before them? A dreadful vision of Edward confronting her in loud or, still more

terrible, speechless wrath under Clare's palms rises before her swimming eyes.

"I do not know; they may. Oh, how I wish"—catching at a straw—"that I could go to Canning Town!"

"I am afraid that is not possible to-day."

"Could not that nice couple take me in?"

"I am afraid not."

His words are chilling, but the throb at his heart is louder than before. She heaves another prodigious sigh, and once again looks about mechanically for her absent gloves.

"Then, I suppose there is no help for it."

"Shall I call you a hansom?"

"If you like."

He is so afraid of her vacillating away once again from the only sensible plan which it is in her power to adopt, that he gives her no time to change her mind, and in another minute a cab stands at the door. She submits passively while he puts her in, forgetting even that she has not paid for her coffee; and at first it seems as if she were to be packed off like a parcel, and without any more power of utterance than if she had been wrapped in brown paper and tied with string. But the noise of the flaps, which he stands upon the step to shut down upon her, seems to give her back her speech.

"You will let me hear, whatever there is to hear, *at once.*"

"*At once.*"

"And you will not believe—you will try not to believe——"

The wheels drown what he is not to believe, but he knows it pretty well.

* * * * *

Althea drives along through a mist, although the sun is showing to foreigners all and sundry what he can do, when he is put to it, in the way of shining upon that town whose chimneys are believed to have bested him. It is the fullest time of the afternoon, and a block often brings her to a standstill. She sees that people are looking harder at her than usual, and, though accustomed to being stared at for her prettiness, feels that there is something different to-day.

Clare's butler—he is new since her last visit—announces to her with apparent pleasure that his mistress is "Not at home," and, when she feebly says that she will come in and wait, looks respectfully doubtful.

"Mrs. Boteler is not very well, 'm, and her horders were that no one, with the exception of one or two hintimate friends, was to be admitted."

"I am one of the exceptions. I am Mrs. Boteler's sister."

At that he ceases his opposition, and she follows

him, quakingly asking herself whether she has indeed spoken truth.

Clare is lying on the sofa, and Althea has time for one moment of poignant anxiety as to what emotion she shall see succeeding the first inevitable one of surprise before Mrs. Boteler jumps up, with no appearance of ill-health, and runs to meet her.

"*At last!*" she cries. "Now, are not you ashamed of yourself?"

The reproach is so gay and gentle, and applies so obviously to no worse crime than her having absented herself, that Althea, breaking down under the reaction, bursts into tears.

"My dear, how ill you look! What is it?"

The other's sobs make her scarcely intelligible.

"I have come—to ask—whether—you will take me—take me—in."

The arms instantly clasped round her thin shoulders would be answer enough, even without the galloping response:

"There is so much need to ask that, is not there?"

She draws the humbled girl down on the sofa beside her, and, not teasing her with questions, waits for her to explain herself. But Althea's first words have no relation to herself.

"You were lying down. Are not you well?"

Clare blushes slightly.

"I never felt better in my life; but, you know, William is so fussy about me."

Althea stares stupidly at her. The squalid tornado that has rent her life seems to have blown away half her wits.

"And—and the others? How is—how is Fanny?"

"Fanny is a tremendous success."

The figures of Pharaoh's butler and baker, with their unexplained variety of fate, rise quaintly before Althea's dimmed mental eye, the one with his head lifted up, and the other hanged. Fanny a tremendous success, and *she!*

"I must say that, if I am tired, William is *excellent* about taking her to balls."

A trivial vision of William with his arm chronically twined round Fanny's waist displaces the butler and baker before the eyes of William's sister-in-law, lessening the virtue of his sacrifice, but does not detain her a moment from the real subject of her preoccupation.

"And—and Ned?"

Mrs. Boteler's soft face stiffens a little.

"He has not been up for some weeks; he is reading hard for Greats. Poor fellow! he realises that work is the best thing for him."

Tone and words are dry, and *tant soit peu* reproachful, but to Althea they bring an untold relief. He knows nothing; he has heard nothing. That terrible

vision of a brother vengefully confronting her is only a figment of her own brain. For the moment, at least, she may let herself go to the unspeakable ease and solace of this reached haven. Her tired head falls back on the sofa-cushion, and the water stands again in her eyes. Her whole look is so bruised and pitiful that the other's conscience smites her for her transient severity.

"I see that something very bad has happened. Do not you think you could tell me what it is?"

At the delicate kindness of this inquiry the shower falls.

"You have left her?"

A speechless nod.

"For good?"

"Yes."

"You have quarrelled with her?"

"Yes."

"And you never mean to go back?"

"God forbid!"

A crescendo of cautious but eager cheerfulness has marked Mrs. Boteler's questions, and at the energy of this last disclaimer she flings both arms again round her sister's neck.

"Oh, I *am* glad! Do not be angry with me, but I *am* glad! I knew that you must find out in time what a fraud she is; but I feared it might be a long while first."

"Do not call her names!" cries Althea, with a shiver of stung loyalty to her broken ideal. "I loved her dearly; I believed in her—oh, *how* I believed in her!—but I have been dreadfully—*dreadfully* disillusioned."

"Since when?"

Althea heaves a sigh of deep humiliation.

"I can see now that it has been coming for a long time, that she has been growing sick of me; but it culminated this morning when I remonstrated with her about something she was going to do, which I thought absolutely criminal."

"*Criminal!*"

Clare's eyes sparkle at the thought of Miss Bateson having placed herself within the clutch of the law.

"Morally criminal, I mean."

"And her answer was, to turn you out of doors?"

"I turned myself out. I could not stay to hear any more such—such outrages as she was heaping upon me."

Clare reddens in sympathy with the scarlet that has bathed her sister.

"I always felt that there were great possibilities of Billingsgate latent in her."

"I left all my things behind me; I did not even"—with a half-scared look at her hands—"remember to take my gloves."

"I will send for them at once"—rising and ringing the bell. "If I do not"—with a burst of disgust and anger—"she will probably pawn them."

And again Althea shivers.

CHAPTER XVI.

THE servant sent to recover Miss Vane's wardrobe from the apprehended pawnshop returns in time for her to appear in her own clothes at her sister's dinner-table. It is not likely that at the height of the season she will find her relations dining alone; but she has been too self-absorbed to realise this, and, on finding that she will have to face strangers, begs off appearing. But Clare gently discourages the proposal.

"They are only men; and so William will take you in. I will tell him not to talk much to you."

"I am afraid I shall be rather a kill-joy."

"Oh no, you will not. There are only three or four old Etonians come up for the match."

"What match?"

"*What match!*"—laughingly mimicking her. "You had better not let William and Fanny hear you. Do you mean to say you do not know that it is the first day of the Eton and Harrow?"

Nothing can be kinder than William's greeting when they meet in the drawing-room before the arrival of the guests.

"*Very* glad to see you!" he says, shaking her hand almost as heartily as if it had been Fanny's.

There is an intention to kiss her in his eye, but something in her manner makes him abandon it, and substitute the not particularly felicitous remark:

"I thought we should end by rescuing you from the skrieking sisterhood."

His wife, standing near, puts in a gently hasty "We will not talk about that," which diverts her husband's attention to herself, making him ply her with what seem to Althea very teasing questions, as to whether she has obeyed his injunctions in lying long enough on the sofa; whether she is sure she has not seen too many people, etc.

Fanny next claims his attention, her toilet demanding a good deal of facetious criticism and some fingering, so that, on the whole, the returned truant tells herself that, considering what William is, she has come off pretty cheaply.

And there is real kindness in his "Now that we have got you, we shall not let you go in a hurry," as he presses the fingers that rest on his arm against his side during their downward march to the dining-room.

He relapses into funniness two or three times during dinner—as when, with a glance at her collar-bones, he expresses a playful wonder that two such radicals as she and her friend should have dined so often with Duke Humphrey. But for the most part, in obedience, probably, to his wife's orders, he leaves her in peace.

The conversation rolls almost wholly upon the match, and Mr. Boteler throws his bad jokes upon it about the table—jokes which Fanny receives with low bursts of ecstatic laughter, such as, indeed, she bestows upon the sallies of all the other men. Fanny has no repartee, and does much better without a gift which in general brings to its possessor, if a woman, neither love nor money.

The absolute aloofness of the interests about her from that one which has been tyrannising her whole being makes Althea feel inexpressibly stupid. It is with difficulty that she can keep enough wits about her to produce the “Yes” or “No” occasionally asked of her in their right places; to abstract herself for even a moment from the devouring fever of her apprehensions as to how her messenger is prospering on that mission, upon which seems to her to hang whatever of peace may be in store for her future life. How soon is it possible for her to hear the result of Drake's quest?

As time wears on, her preoccupation becomes more and more painful. The ladies have returned to the

drawing-room, and Fanny, with a thoughtful husbanding of the charms which are to be exhibited at two balls, curls herself up on a sofa and goes to sleep, after prettily saying how too pleasant for words it is to have Althea's company again. The other sister, with a nicer observation and a sincerer solicitude, urges the jaded girl to go to bed.

"No, no; I cannot. I should not sleep! I will stay, at all events, until Fanny goes to dress."

There is such a strange excitement in her manner that Clare looks at her alarmed and puzzled.

"You are not—not expecting—anyone?"

"No."

Presently the men come up, and Fanny wakes just in time to shake out her ruffled plumes and stroll on to the balcony with one or two of them, pleasing their ears with her little observations on the stars, which make them feel quite clever.

William devotes himself to his other sister-in-law, and plays with somewhat clumsy variations upon the kindly theme of his determination not to let her go again now he has got her, and his congratulations and rejoicings over her recovered reason. She scarcely hears him, the heightening distress of her mind making her deaf to any other theme.

It is growing evident that she will not learn her fate to-night; that she will have to bridge the enormous

chasm that parts her from another day with sleepless hours of unrelieved suspense. The telegraph-offices must long have been closed, for is not midnight nearing?

Fanny has pecked her good-night upon her sisters' cheeks, and danced away to the brougham; and William, lingering to impress fondly fussy orders upon his wife not to stay up chattering, has followed.

"We do not feel at all inclined to disobey him, do we?" says Clare, with a pitying glance at her sister's white face.

But the other utterly repudiates the hope of slumber.

"I should like to sit up all night."

"Do not you sleep?"

"If I do not, that is no reason for keeping you out of bed."

She follows Clare upstairs with dragging limbs.

"I will not come in, though it is a sore temptation," says Mrs. Boteler, pausing at the threshold of her sister's door; "but I should never hear the last of it if I did"—smiling. "Sleep well, and do not come down to breakfast."

She turns reluctantly, as if loath to leave anything so uncomforted; and the next moment Althea hears her voice speaking to the butler, who has apparently followed her upstairs—"For me?" and his answer: "No; for Miss Vane."

In an instant Althea has sprung into the passage,

and snatched the telegram out of the man's hand, not heeding his explanation: "It was left by mistake at No. 24, and has only just been sent in."

Though in such haste to open it, a moment or two passes before she can master its import, though the message is of the briefest.

* * * * *

It is through no dilatoriness on the part of Drake that Miss Vane has been kept so long upon her gridiron. No sooner has he put her into one hansom than he puts himself into a second, and gives the familiar address, "4, More Mansions." Not only with the object of arresting Faustina at the earliest period, but because he knows that the more he looks at his errand the less he will like it, does he thus bustle its fulfilment.

Drake has no particular objection—adequate cause given—to a row with one of his own sex; but, like all other able-bodied, healthy-minded men, anything in the nature of a quarrel with a woman is extremely distasteful to him.

Faustina herself opens the door, as she had done earlier in the day to Althea.

"I am 'not at home,'" she says cavalierly, "as I must go out in a quarter of an hour; but you may come in for a minute or two."

She leads the way to the drawing-room, which seems to his fancy still to show marks of the morning's battle,

as if that battle had been one where literal instead of metaphorical missiles had hurtled.

Miss Bateson has no more opinion of order and neatness in her surroundings than she has of filial piety, reverence, etc., and to the young man's eyes the absence of Althea's refining and straightening influence is already perceptible.

"You are apt to come at inconvenient moments; but I am not sorry to see you," Faustina says, and so holds out her hand.

His makes no answering motion.

"What does this mean?"

He had been doubtful whether the bluff offhandness of her manner had not concealed some suspicion of his purpose; but her air of apparently unaffected surprise staggers him.

"It means that shaking hands implies a friendly relation, and that it is with no friendly feeling that I come to you to-day."

The surprise, whether real or only well counterfeited, passes out of her eyes, and she sits down.

"If we are going to say unpleasant things to each other, we may as well do it comfortably."

"Thank you, I had rather stand."

"As you please."

There is a slight pause, both combatants arming. It is, perhaps, a false move on the part of Faustina that

it is she who gives the signal to fire. It is, at all events, a relief to her antagonist.

"I gather that Althea has been visiting you with her finger in her eye."

She laughs slightly.

"Then, you gather what is absolutely false."

Faustina shrugs her shoulders.

"She has been communicating with you—the method is unimportant. You cannot deny that, I suppose?"

"I see no reason for introducing her name into the discussion."

"If they have no reference to her, I am quite at a loss to guess the meaning of these heroics." Her voice is contemptuous, and she half strangles a yawn. "And time is short," she adds, with a meaning glance clockwards.

"It will be long enough for me," he says, stung by her tone; "I shall not detain you long. I have only one brief request—one demand to make of you."

"And that is?"

"That you will abandon the at once nefarious and ridiculous scheme with regard to Miss Delafield that I hear you have framed."

The answer takes a moment before it can come as smilingly as its utterer wishes.

"You have said your lesson well, and you have almost as much command of language as your—your

employer; but, as you know, I have never objected to plain speaking, and I should be glad if you would tell me what inducement you hold out to me to comply with a request which may seem to me as ridiculous and nefarious as my project does to you."

"What inducement!" he repeats slowly, as if the shape of the question made it difficult to him for the moment to answer it.

"Or perhaps I should rather say, what deterrent to frighten me from it."

He pauses for a second.

"The absolute and glaring unfitness of the tool for the task—has that no weight with you?"

"I deny your premise. If I had not thought the tool fitted for the task, I should not have picked it out."

"The misery entailed upon the girl's family?"

She shakes her head.

"You know what my opinions are as to the so-called rights of parents to mutilate and cramp their children's lives. You may forget the fact; but you once shared them."

He passes by the personal application with quiet contempt.

"The horrors to which you expose her?"

She smiles.

"You may keep your breath to cool your porridge,

and your rhetoric for a paragraph in a society paper. Have you yet to learn that, with me the implement is always a most secondary consideration, and is esteemed solely as it may lend its polish or its blade to the service of the Cause?"

He puts out his hand impatiently.

"*Connu!* I have heard it before. Save it for someone to whom it is fresher."

Her good-humour, or at least her self-command, seems proof even against this shaft.

"Have you come to the bottom of your bag of bombs?" she asks jeeringly.

"Not quite; I have one or two left."

Something in the look of his face or the determination of his manner makes her vaguely restless.

She takes up a paper-knife and balances it on her fingers. It was an early love-token from Althea, and has *Auf Erwig* foolishly slanting across its blade in gilt letters; but neither of them notices this. He looks down at her calmly before again speaking; and she, suddenly feeling that the inequality of their levels is giving him an advantage over her, rises and, standing firmly on her well-planted feet, draws up her tall stature.

"You are very self-confident," he says, with an inflection that sounds almost one of pity—"very sure of yourself. It is a valuable quality, but it may land you in a morass."

"Would you mind keeping to the text, or shall we have the rest of the sermon another day?"

Her voice is still a jeering one, but there has come into it an indefinable accent of alarm.

"Have you reflected what a hornets' nest you will bring about your ears by provoking the enmity of a family as powerful by connection and social standing as Miss Delafield's?"

"What harm can they do to me? The claws have been pared and the fangs drawn of such as they this many a year."

Again he halts for a moment. She is so close to him that he can feel her breath on his cheek, and knows that it is coming hot and anxiously.

"They could make the place too hot to hold you." He waits a moment for this statement to have time to sink well in, and then adds: "I think you would find other people beside me withdrawing from your acquaintance."

"You are threatening me with the loss of your acquaintance?"

"I am threatening nothing. I am simply telling you what will be the result of your action."

"It comes to the same thing. You are implying that you will withdraw your acquaintance—what I used once humorously to call your friendship—from me if I persist."

"What you used humorously to call my friendship for you—yes."

Her next question comes heralded and, as it were, delayed by a dark blush:

"That means, in plain English, that you will withdraw the help—the pecuniary help—which you have given me all these years; given by you and accepted by me without humiliation, because we were both in the same boat."

"We were never in the same boat."

"We were in the same boat, inasmuch as we had both been turned out of doors for our fidelity to our opinions."

"Was it for *your opinions* that you were turned out of doors?"

He looks at her piercingly, well in the eyes, and hers, after trying to brazen it out for an instant, drop.

"It was for carrying, or trying to carry, them to their logical conclusion," she answers; but though there is defiance, there is also fear in her tone. The young man shrugs his shoulders contemptuously.

"I have no wish to stir up that old mud. I helped you because I could not see an old playmate starve; because I believed that injustice had been meted out to you—that your convictions *were* convictions, although they had led you into extravagant and immoral action——"

She breaks in, unable—though conscious of the ticklish nature of her situation—to deny herself the poignant pleasure of a gibe:

“*Extravagant and immoral!* Give me time to enjoy this new strain. Since when has this admiring loyalty to the Marriage Laws blossomed out in you?”

He does what it is always wise, and almost as always difficult, to do in the case of angry speech, passes it by, continuing his own theme as if she had not spoken.

“All these years I have been trying to keep my belief in you—a belief that, under all the puff and push and vulgar striving for notoriety, there still existed something of the real thing—some grain of selfless love, of righteous anger, of noble faith; but during the last months that belief has been daily growing weaker, and to-day it has died.”

His voice has throughout been neither loud nor vituperative, despite the stinging severity of his words, and through the last clause of his speech there runs an intonation of sadness. Her answer begins in bluster:

“What is it to me whether you or such as you weary me with your stupid belief, or insult me with your stupider disbelief?” Then, as he continues to hold her with the quiet determination of his eye, she changes her tone: “It would be more to the purpose if, instead

of slanging me, you were to treat me to a practical statement of what it is that you wish me to do."

"I wish you to sit down at once and write a note to Miss Delafield."

"Dictated by you?"

"If you prefer it."

He has baffled her by taking her derisive question as if seriously asked, and for a moment she hesitates.

"And supposing that I refuse?"

"I think you will repent it."

"Supposing that I fling your petty help in your face, and defy you?"

He wisely leaves this query to answer itself, which after a while it does, by its author walking slowly to the writing-table and sitting down at it. Her self-respect is almost as much restored by the utterance of her threat of renunciation as if she had carried it out, and it is with what she feels to be real dignity that, when seated, she turns to him.

"You have interfered in a matter with which you have no smallest concern; you have stooped to be the tool of a girl as contemptible in character as puny in intellect; you have used a lever which no generous mind would have employed; and now, will you please tell me what I am to say?"

CHAPTER XVII.

"ALL right!"

When Althea's eyes allow her to read it, she finds that these two words compose her wire.

She is standing lost in the immensity of her relief, when Clare's voice sounds in her ear.

"No bad news, I hope?"

"Oh no—none."

Mrs. Boteler has, after all, crossed her sister's threshold, prepared to throw William's prohibition to the winds on the smallest encouragement. But she gets none, and after a moment or two retires, rather reluctantly, but without putting any further question.

Althea is left to the enjoyment of her rebound from suspense—an enjoyment that at first seems perfect, but afterwards is nibbled at by carping questions.

"All right!" What does it mean? How much ground does it cover? Is the reprieve only a temporary one, or is the overhanging evil for ever averted? If so, what means has Drake employed? By what lever has he been able to remove the mountain of Faustina's purpose?

Over these problems she tosses most of the night—a regrettable waste of time and tissue, since morning brings the solution of, at all events, one of them in a letter from Drake himself:

“DEAR MISS VANE,

“I hope that the telegram I have just sent you will relieve your anxiety. I am very pleased to say that I have been able to persuade Miss Bateson permanently to abandon her project. She is leaving London at once for some little time, so that you need not fear the disagreeableness of a meeting.

“Trusting that this will set your mind quite at rest,

“I am,

“Yours very truly,

“JOHN TRECOTHICK DRAKE.”

She turns the page, to see whether there is nothing more on the other side; but the postscript is not as sure a find in a man's letter as in a woman's, and from this one it is altogether absent.

She reads the note again with deep breaths of relief as she goes along. “*Permanently to abandon her project!*” How *has* he done it? Oh, *what* a relief! She can face Ned again! Ned need never know! But how *has* he done it? He might have gone a little more into detail.

She reads it a third time. Nothing—absolutely nothing but the bare facts!

They, at least, are entirely satisfactory, thank God! but he must have known how she would hunger for an explanation. He need not have been quite so short, nor—with a fourth survey—quite so dry.

At that she takes herself up for carping at one who has just done her such an unspeakable service. Ah! but in letting him do it has she lost him? Has Faustina repeated to him the calumnies that had driven her (Althea) blind and staggering into the public street? And has he, in part at least, and against his will, believed them?

The question buries her face downwards in her pillows, so deep that the light knock with which someone prefaces her entrance is unheard by her. She jumps back to the consciousness that Clare, in a pretty dressing-gown, and with a still prettier morning smile, is standing by her bed.

“Were you asleep? and do you always lie on your face?”

“Never.”

“I came to ask how you are.”

“How kind of you!”

“Did you sleep well?”

“Middling.”

“And had a satisfactory post?”

"A very small one."

With a careless air, Althea's hand goes out towards the letter lying face uppermost on the counterpane, and covers it.

"But a pleasant one?"

"Oh yes, quite pleasant."

The elder sister makes a slight pause, as if expecting something further; but nothing comes, and with a faint and very passing cloud on her brightness she goes away.

All through that day Althea has the disagreeable consciousness that Clare is naturally expecting some further explanation of the cause that has thrown her upon William Boteler's hospitality, expecting her to give a slight sketch of the levin bolt that has split a friendship proudly warranted to outlive the everlasting hills.

But such explanation, such sketch, Althea is absolutely incapable of giving. Her deity lies in shivers, proved to have been no more a deity than "the brutish gods of Nile," its godhood having never existed save in the dulness of her own belief; but the days are yet too recent, when from its shrine it sent out inspiration, and she knelt in adoration on its altar-steps, for her to be able to face the storm of well-merited stones that would assail her fallen Dagon were she to explain to what a depth it had sunk.

She shivers away from the topic as often as she sees any approach made to it; and Clare, after one or two delicate essays at a fuller confidence, desists, hiding whatever disappointment she may feel under the mantle of tender compassion in which she wraps the strayed lamb. And, after all, she does not feel much.

Althea has recovered her wits—that is all that really matters—though by so mortifying a method that she naturally has no great desire to talk of it; through the agency of plenty of new milk and strong *consommé* she will soon also regain her looks and spirits; and meanwhile it is kindest to let her alone.

Althea accepts with dumb gratitude this discreet and merciful mode of treatment. For the first day or two she is still so numbed and bruised, that she has little feeling save for the physical repose and well-being that are to repair the ravages made even more by Faustina's cruelty than by her *cuisine*.

The immensity of the relief from her apprehension is followed by a proportionate reaction. She has explained to herself the brevity of Drake's note by the natural hypothesis that he will call in person to eke out the scantiness of his communication. Her brain busies itself in a woolly way with the problem of how to manœuvre for him an opportunity to see her alone when he does call. But no need for such manœuvring arises, and the first thing that lifts the girl out of her

lethargy is the realisation that the days are going by, and that Drake has made no sign.

"She is a pretty girl, and you know I would do anything for either of your sisters," William says one day to his wife, with the natural resentment of a *mauvais plaisant* whose wit has miscarried; "but I must say that she is a bit of a wet-blanket."

"I am afraid she is barely up to joking yet," replies his wife soothingly.

"She must be precious thin-skinned if she cannot stand a little chaff. I thought she liked it."

"So she will, I am sure, when she is herself again," rejoins Mrs. Boteler sweetly and sincerely.

But William is not to be so easily mollified, and he goes off grumbling. "So unlike Fanny!" It is with Fanny that he seeks comfort.

"*You* will not burst into tears if I say anything a little amusing to you, as Althea does?"

"Burst into tears!" echoes Fanny, with renovating surprise—"what do you mean? You know that you always make me die of laughing. I do not know how you manage it, but you do."

His brow clears. But it is destined to be overcast again for the same cause many times during the ensuing weeks, since it is as impossible for William not to make jokes as it is for Althea to laugh at them. In vain she tells herself that the part of the day during which

she is exposed to the fire of his pleasantries is so small that her gratitude might pay to his hospitality the tribute of a little mirth. The quality of his humour seems to have the faculty of inevitably stiffening her muscles.

And if there is anything else about him that tries her more than his fun, it is his tiresome solicitude about his wife's health—the pushing of needless stools, and insisting on undesired sofas, proclaiming as they do to each chance comer Clare's hopes of maternity. The first two or three times that this occurs, Althea glances at her sister with sympathetic indignation; but seeing her with cheerful gratitude accept the superfluous footstool, and lie down upon the sofa on which she had rather have sat upright, she withdraws her unneeded compassion, and centres it all upon herself.

And in truth she is very unhappy. The recovery of her nerves from the shock of the explosion is so incomplete as to leave an irritability behind it which renders her difficult to live with.

The violent death by which her passionate love and reverence for Faustina has perished has left a void which, as she gloomily tells herself, nothing can ever fill; her plan of noble life is in ignoble shivers; and till intercourse with him has ceased, she has not realised how much she had grown to lean upon Drake. He had done his best for her, as his high heart always prompts

him to do for any suffering creature; but now that his task is ended he has passed on from her to some other pain that needs him more.

Is there any such? She shakes her head. And these happy people into whose lives she has thrust herself, only to take the edge off their pleasantness, do not need her. Often it fills her with a grieved surprise, that yet does not alter the case, to find how absolutely out of touch she has grown with their interests.

Those months of face-to-faceness with the grimnesses of life appear to have robbed her of all zest for its graces. And yet her whole scheme of existence seems now to have been so entirely bound up with Faustina's as to have necessarily perished with her.

There is one person who could have helped her to reconstruct it, to weave afresh the strands of the broken web; but he has thought it best to abstain from meddling any further in her concerns. He has probably, like Faustina, recognised her incapacity to grapple with any real difficulties, to carry out any worthy task. If he had not, would he at such a turning-point of her history have left her?

And meanwhile she will have to make some plan for her future life. The place of resident sister-in-law, once so affectionately offered her, is no longer vacant. Fanny has more than justified by brilliant success her appointment to it, and a man would have to be "either

a wild beast or a god" who could desire the permanent presence of *two* "in-laws" by his hearthstone.

Even if William came under one of these heads, of which Althea sees no sign, the approaching baby will at its advent make an extra inmate impossible, or at least highly inconvenient. She points this out to her sister, and Clare, though sweetly and hospitably waving away the subject, does not deny the fundamental truth of the proposition. Perhaps she is beginning to realise that it is through Althea that have come to her the only conjugal jars that have marred her bliss.

And Althea herself? With daily deepening gloom she realises that she has cast herself out of her own sphere, without having gained a footing in any other. There is not a spot on earth where she is not a superfluity.

The season draws towards its close, and London is nearing its most smelly and gasping moment. William's anxieties about his wife are now complicated by fears of the possible effect upon her of the unusual heat, and his fussy exertions to keep Clare cool send up everybody else's temperature.

The villa at Wimbledon which is the outcome of his cares, and to which the family now migrate from Saturday to Monday, is a sensible relief to all. It is a large villa, with an Italian name, and charming grounds that wander away into a pretty wood—a real wood, with

well-girthed trees and flourishing bracken. One might be a hundred miles from London, which each visitor remarks as punctually as we all annually comment with surprising surprise upon the lengthening days of March and the drawing-in evenings of October. It is not too distant from London for Fanny to accomplish her tale of balls from it, and on Sundays limp Londoners are only too glad to avail themselves of its green shades and its bamboo chairs.

It is a pleasant life, and for the first few days even Althea's spirits feel the tonic of its cool charm; then, with returning energies, seems to come an added power of tasting the bitterness of her own failure. Her irritation reaches its culminating-point one Saturday afternoon, when Fanny, having been slightly stung by a wasp in the morning—a calamity which has made William spend himself in caresses and remedies—has been recompensed on his return from the Stock Exchange by the present of a pair of mechanical toys, bought with the object of distracting her attention from her sufferings.

Fanny is fond of toys, and at once kneels delightedly down on the veranda, and, winding up one, sets it off. William follows suit with the other, and soon two pigs—a woolly white and a snuffy brown one—are racing in short chopping gallop across the tiled floor, to the accompaniment of their owner's unbounded mirth. Althea

laughs, too, inevitably at the clicking, bumping, colliding swine, but at some thought checks herself.

"Are not they too funny for words?" cries Fanny, still kneeling, flushed and rapturous. "Did you ever see such archangels?"

"Come, do not be too strong-minded to smile once in a way," adds William waggishly.

If she complies, it is a little austerely.

"The fact is, I am always afraid to be amused at anything of the sort until I know how they are made."

Fanny sits back on her heels, opening her eyes.

"How they are made? What do you mean?"

"I mean that I like to know how much human suffering they imply." Then, seeing both her companions, with arrested gaiety, look to her for explanation, she goes on: "For instance, one would think that children's balloons and indiarubber toys were harmless things, would not one? Yet in the factories where they are made, where carbon bisulphide is employed, the vapours are so noxious that workers have been known to go mad, and try to throw themselves out of the windows."

There is a rather dismal silence, and Althea proceeds further to improve the occasion.

"It is as well to know how many tears go to make up one laugh, is not it?"

"You are, at all events, resolved that there shall

not be too much laugh where *you* are," replies William rudely.

She retorts in the same tone, and for the first time their covert exasperation with each other breaks out in too candid speech. Fanny wisely slides away, and they are left to fight it out.

It is of no use that, in a paroxysm of subsequent remorse, Althea flings herself at Clare's knees, crying:

"You had better let me go before I have quite spoilt all your lives."

"I am sure you do not mean to do it," replies poor Mrs. Boteler rather miserably.

The next day is Sunday, and by the afternoon, when the London visitors begin to arrive, the brows of the family are smoothed. William has injudiciously insisted upon formally apologising, which has made things much worse; but outwardly the halcyon seems to brood.

Althea has ardently tried to stem the current of her brother-in-law's too florid acknowledgments by the candid confession of her own superior faultiness, and though the personal distaste for him lasts, and must last, it is against herself that her whole contrite soul is crying out during the morning service in the church on the Common.

If hearts could be laid bare, what strangely various tributary streams of confession would be seen flowing into that General one to whose noble tune our lips weekly

move! How much more of temper and spite than real concern for the sufferers by the abuse she had so superfluously dragged in had she felt yesterday! The fact so clumsily introduced is true, and can be matched with hundreds of other heartrending ones of the same kind. But how much more harm than good had she done by lugging it in so malapropos by the head and shoulders! How full of alloy are her best motives! how profitless her activities! how pitiable the outcome of both!

"I shall never do anything with my life," she says to herself as she walks home.

She repeats it in deeper dejection later in the afternoon as she sits alone—since everyone else, both visitors and housemates, have strayed away garden- and woodwards—at the deserted tea-table. It is set in the veranda, where every variety of wicker chair and lounge invites to repose. On the pleasant house the awnings are still lowered against the heat, but a little lazy air comes from courting the gay flower-beds to lift the hair of the drooping girl.

She has been pouring out tea for Clare, having caught with remorseful eagerness at even this poor little chance of being useful. But now all, like Wordsworth's stag, have "drunk their fill," and left her.

Her head, beautifully dressed by Clare's maid in the latest mode, hangs over the back of her bamboo

chair; her feet, in pale silk stockings and brodered shoes, rest on the rung of a vacated seat near her; and her faint-coloured gown, thin and expensive, drifts about her as the light wind gently pulls at it. A more exquisite picture of opulent idleness it would be difficult to see, or one more unlike that working woman whom she had been so proud to call herself.

It is the sharp consciousness of this contrast, both to the setting in which he had been wont to see her, and still more to the condition in which he had last parted from her, that is for the first moment uppermost in the jumble of feelings with which a late arrival from London is overwhelmed and silenced as he now looks at her.

He has stepped, footman-led, through the wide-open drawing-room windows, and, hearing steps, she lifts her head languidly, thinking that it is the servants coming to take away the tea.

CHAPTER XVIII.

THE discovery of her mistake brings her to her feet in a second. Even in the hurry of springing up from a low chair, "How graceful!" is his thought. For awhile she stands, a silent lily—silent as her sisters in the parterre—before him; then speaks sighingly:

"You have been a long while in coming."

They are far from being the words which she would have chosen, but they seem to say themselves.

"Yes."

"I began to think that you were not coming at all."

"Did you?"

"I have been very anxious to see you"—a slight interval—"in order to thank you."

"You *did* thank me."

"Only on paper—for such a service!"

She stops, words running short, as they are apt to do when any extra demand is made upon them.

"Indeed you are overrating it."

"Overrating it! I wonder, have you any idea how great—how infinite the relief was?"

•

"I hoped it would be."

"I can never, *never*, NEVER thank you enough! But how did you do it? By what miracle? What arguments did you use?"

Her questions tumble over each other in her haste, but there is in her companion no corresponding hurry to answer.

"How *did* you do it? You do not know how I have thirsted to hear! Oh, *do* tell me!"

Her hands are clasped together, and held up close under her chin, which always gives a greater air of urgency. But in his eyes she reads no acquiescence, only a deep embarrassment.

"Do not you think it is just as well sometimes not to know how the strings are pulled?"

She is silenced for a moment, brought up against the dead wall of his resistance; then persists:

"Surely you must understand of what profound interest it is to me to learn how *you* succeeded where *I* failed so egregiously."

"I am afraid I cannot tell you."

His face is so full of distress, and his tone so final, that she has no choice but to yield. She turns away to the table, and in a constrained voice offers him tea. As he takes it from her, he sees that a far-reaching blush, extending from ear to ear, has swallowed up her pallor.

She has interpreted his refusal after her own manner. The reason why he is unable to give her the details of his interview with Faustina is because those details have largely consisted in such shameful accusations against herself as have never quite ceased their odious chime in her ears since the dreadful hour when she first heard them. Her tone is stiff and changed when she next speaks:

"You, at least, will not mind telling me—if you remember, you said in your note that she was leaving London for awhile—whether she has yet returned."

"She has gone to America on a lecturing tour."

"Gone to America!" She falls into her bamboo chair again, as if her legs could not support the weight of such news, while a long sigh of relief heaves her laces and lawns. "And to think that I should have lived to be glad that she is in another hemisphere!"

It is his turn to put a question:

"And Miss Delafield?"

"She has gone into the country with her parents to celebrate her coming of age. My eldest brother is staying with them."

The news had given her a sensible pleasure when she heard it, but she announces it now in a tone of the deepest dejection.

"But you are glad?"

"Oh yes—very glad!"

There is so little of the quality alluded to in Althea's voice or words that he looks at her puzzled and chilled. Naturally unable to follow the course of her thoughts, her change of weather vaguely disheartens him; while the conviction to which his refusal to enter into explanations has made her leap, that he has heard and believed Faustina's calumnies, and that to them has been owing his delay in seeking her, ties lead to the tongue which in many imaginary dialogues since they parted has been so eagerly glib.

Since she has not given him leave to sit down, he remains standing by her, hat in hand, while in the distance, across the bosky lawn, little groups of people are moving in leisurely enjoyment. Among them Althea detects the Boteler pair. William has made Clare lean on his arm, as he is fond of doing in public—a tiresome mode of announcement of his hopes of paternity, which always makes his sister-in-law very angry. She forgets to be angry now, in the anxiety of gauging the likelihood of their turning housewards. There seems to be no immediate fear of it, as they are talking to successive guests. Althea knows that Clare likes to be near William when he is in company, both to act as a gentle drag upon his sprightliness, and to hinder his asking after people's dead or disgraced relations, as he has a well-meant, but uncomfortable, way of doing.

After all, why should Althea desire their absence,

seeing that their presence would be no interruption, since she and Drake seem to have absolutely nothing to say to each other? After a while it appears that he has something to say, and when he can speak from beneath the douche of cold water that her manner had poured over him, he says it:

"I should have been earlier to see you, only that——"

"Only that; what?"

He wonders why her voice should tremble so much; he does not know that she is breathlessly asking herself with what words not grossly insulting he can put the explanation of his repugnance to meet her.

"Only that I thought it kinder to stay away."

"*Kinder!*"

How painfully she is reddening again!

"I thought that the sight of me must be odious to you."

She says neither "Yes" nor "No."

"It was not my fault; but I knew that to you I must be associated with the most painful and repulsive experience of your life."

He gets no contradiction.

"I see by your silence that I was right, and so, as I say, I thought it kinder not to thrust myself upon you till those associations had had time to weaken. If I had been really kind, I suppose I should have

kept away altogether; but I was not quite up to that."

She listens in apparently acquiescent dumbness; and, after waiting vainly for any reassuring utterance from her, he adds, in a tone of deeply-wounded feeling, and with what, though she is not looking at him, she knows to be a comprehensive glance at her luxurious surroundings:

"At all events, *now* you have found your right setting."

There is something so unmistakably "going" about the air that accompanies this last phrase that she rouses herself, and, sitting upright in her chair, with a hand on each wicker arm, lifts a strangely-moved, indignant face towards him, speaking at last in an intense low voice:

"I cannot compliment you upon your penetration."

"Are you implying that I am wrong? that you are not happy?"

"I am miserable."

"Is it possible?"—with agitation—"and yet, when I first caught sight of you, I had such an impression of perfect well-being—of the right woman in the right place."

"The right woman in the right place—lying in a wicker chair doing nothing; that is all you think I am fit for." He makes a sign of eager denial; but she

goes on: "However, appearances are deceitful, as I told you when you accused me of going to faint at my tea-party in Canning Town."

The mention of that stormy entertainment draws them at once nearer together; and without waiting any longer for leave, he sits down beside her.

"And you are *miserable*?"

"I say it advisedly—I am miserable; not only so, but I am the cause of misery in others." She reads such a refreshing incredulity of this last statement in her listener's face that she sails on with a high courage: "They took me in when, on your advice, I threw myself upon their compassion; they did their best to cheer and comfort me, and, in return, I am the viper who has come out of the heat and stung them." She is surprised herself at the force and beauty of this metaphor; but he receives it only with open-eyed amazement. "I know that it is very tiresome to be made the recipient of an unmasked confidence; but it is, or seems, so long since I have had anyone to talk to *à cœur ouvert*, that you must try to forgive me."

He has an impression that her hand has half slid out towards him, but the intention remains only a sketch; and they are both growing so upset that neither is quite sure about it.

"I was afraid that it would be some time before you got over such a shock," he says, in a tone of the

gravest, kindest sympathy, his words coming very un-readily, through the excess of his apprehension lest he should happen upon any that might touch her on the raw. "I know that to you it was the loss, not only of the person you loved best in the world, but of a creed."

She gives a slow assent, head downbent, the toe of one little shoe drawing restless designs on the floor; then, as if dissatisfied, qualifies it:

"And yet, no; that does not cover the area of my unhappiness. I could do without Faustina"—pronouncing her name very distinctly, to show him how well she can manage it—"since I have learnt that she never existed as I believed her to be. I could do without her, if only I could find someone else to teach me how to set about rebuilding my life; the bricks are there, if only some mason would show me how to lay them upon each other. Left to myself, it will be but a jerry-built edifice."

Her words, grown very low, though perfectly audible, die into silence. She has addressed them, apparently, to the red tiles at her feet. It seems to her a very long moment before he takes up her challenge.

"I have not yet told you the chief motive that brought me here to-day."

She snatches a half-reproachful glance at him.

"I hoped that it was a friendly feeling for me. Had you any other?"

He does not answer her directly.

"Do you remember," he says slowly, "that evening at Canning Town, just before we parted——"

"Yes."

"You said to me that if it were not for Faustina, and what you owed her, you would be inclined to come among us for good. What I have come here for to-day is to ask you whether that was a passing impulse, or the expression of a lasting desire."

Her gray eyes have leapt up from the tiles to throw themselves into his. That is at first the sole response he gets; but presently a trembling sentence falters forth:

"Do not tantalise me. Is there any place—can any place for me be found among you?"

"Have not you already suffered enough maltreatment at our hands?"

They both laugh joyfully.

"Not nearly!"

A moment later a slight cloud obscures her brilliancy.

"But the question is, Can you find any sphere of work for me where I shall not do you discredit? *You* know how apt I am to bungle everything I attempt."

"I will risk it."

Again eyes and smiles meet, and there is a blissful pause. He is the first to become business-like.

"I need not say that I have tied you to nothing. I came here with not very high hopes; but if you really care to cast in your lot with us, there is a place waiting for you."

"What sort of a place? Shall I be up to it? Shall I dare to undertake it?"

"I think so. Do you know that we have at last got our Women's Settlement on its feet?"

"Yes?"

"It is open to *all* women, and does not postulate a University education."

"No?"

"We have knocked three or four houses into one, and got our Lady Principal, and started our classes, and have been for a week in working order."

"Yes?"

"The residents are boarded and lodged; each has a little room of her own, and common sitting and dining-rooms; and each takes up a special branch of work."

"Such as——"

"Such as nursing the poor in their own homes, teaching classes of boys."

She has been following him with breathless attention, but at the enumeration of the two kinds of service he has instanced shakes her head despondently.

"Should I be any good at either? I have grown to distrust myself so utterly."

"You must not be impatient. I have not reached your place among us yet." At that she cheers up again. "You remember your special girls—the ones who were turned off from their factory for giving information to the inspector?"

"Of course I do!"

"If you recollect, you were very kind to them—dancing with them at our social evenings——"

"You are not going to suggest that I shall set up as the D'Egville of Canning Town?"

"Will not you let me unfold my plan before you begin to pick holes in it?" She lays her hand across her lips with a pretty gesture of determined silence, and he goes on: "What I came here to suggest was that you should utilise a talent I know that you possess in their behalf."

She lifts her eyebrows incredulously, but in her voice is an eager hope:

"Do I possess one?"

"I know that, like Desdemona, you are "delicate with your needle."

"Yes, that is the one thing I am not mediocre at."

She looks to him with joyful alertness for further explanation.

"Well, then, you could render us really valuable

help by getting those girls together and starting a co-operative workroom."

There is a slight pause, but Althea's kindling look and genial expansion reassure him as to its not being one of disapproval.

"I think you *have* found something for me that I might venture to undertake," she says humbly, yet with confidence. "How clever of you to have hit upon my one gift! It has lain in a napkin so long—Faustina could not bear the sight of a needle—that I hope it has not grown rusty."

"Let me give you a rough outline of my idea," he says, a slight conscientious misgiving at the unquestioning docility of her acquiescence mingling with his relief and joy, "that I may not feel I am letting you in for what you do not understand."

She makes a sign of eager assent.

"I thought that you might get them to come to one of the class-rooms—they are out of work, and would be only too thankful; and send out circulars to your friends, telling them at what rate you would take in every kind of needlework and dressmaking."

She gives him a nod of bright agreement, and he goes on:

"I am only giving you the idea in the rough, but I am sure that it has the elements of success in it, as it

would supply an already badly-felt want. I know that you could make something of it."

"Do you really believe that I might? At all events I shall be only too thankful to try"—with a long sigh of relief. "When may I come?"

"The sooner the better."

In the eagerness of their project and their proximity, both have again risen.

"And if I get into difficulties—if I want advice—help—will you be within reach to give it me?"

"I shall be close at hand; I live at the Men's Settlement."

Both are silent for awhile, a delightful dawning sense of the unity of interest that is for the future to connect their lives giving their spirits that sort of hush that comes with the real dawn. It is Althea who first regains tremulous speech:

"How recklessly I am adding to my debt of gratitude to you, which was already far too big ever to be discharged!"

He answers her look with a tender fixity.

"And you have counted the cost? You will not regret all this?"

His eye takes in with a comprehensive look all the details of her high civilisation. She breaks into emotional laughter.

"The gown is Clare's; the shoes are Fanny's—I renounce them all!"

"What are you renouncing?" cries William, appearing round an unexpected corner, with his wife still leaning on his unnecessary arm, and looking curiously at Althea's unknown companion, while he adds, in a fine vein of flat pleasantry: "What are you renouncing—your godfathers and godmothers? Is not it rather late in the day to do that?"

She turns upon him with a radiant smile.

"Not my godfathers and godmothers—but my brother-in-law!"

THE END.



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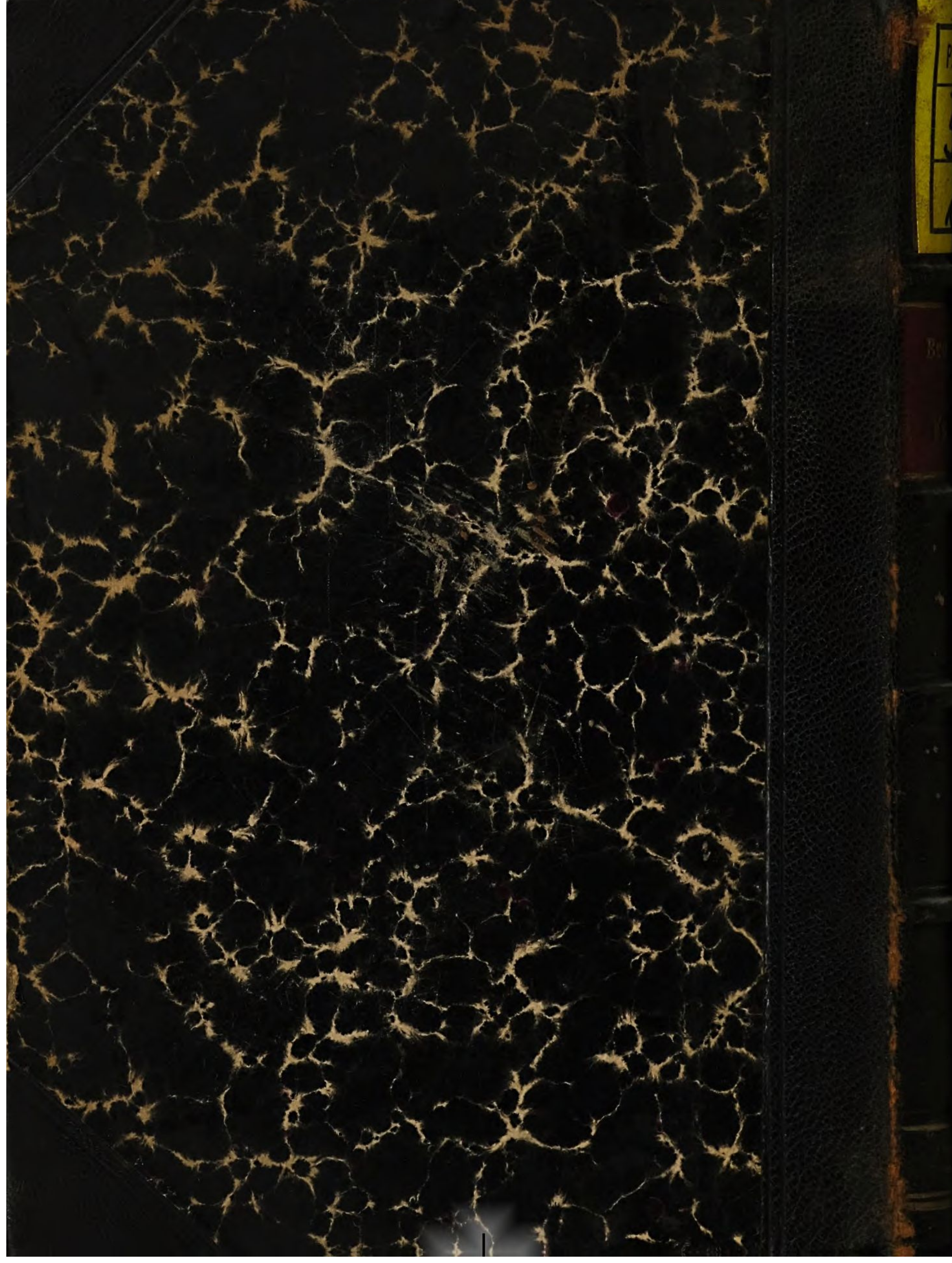
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